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The primary purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the ways in which African-American male principals support African-American male students in rural schools. Secondly, the study explores how experiences during their developmental years influenced these supportive leadership practices of the African-American male principals. Extensive research exists on the successes and failures of African-American males; however, this research has been primarily conducted in urban settings. Rural schools and principals face similar challenges and obstacles of deficit-thinking, inadequate resources, and poor performance in educating African-American males, but may also face other conditions unique to the rural context. As such, this qualitative study examines the relationships and leadership practices of eight, rural African-American male principals as they support African-American male students at their respective schools. The findings revealed African-American principals support African-American males by encouraging positive relationships, promoting academic and community supports, and being cognizant of exclusionary disciplinary practices. Critical race theory (CRT) is used as a theoretical framework to explore how race influences negative perceptions about many African-American principals, as they face trials and tribulations themselves as educational leaders—and in many cases, are subjected to the same racism as their African-American male students.

OUR BROTHERS' KEEPER: THE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALE PRINCIPALS AND THEIR WORK WITH AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALE STUDENTS IN RURAL SCHOOLS

by

NeShawn Cox Dawson

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Approved by

_____
Committee Chair

In Loving Memory of
Sarah Jane Campbell Clark, my loving grandmother
and
Erica Cannon Cox, sister-in-law

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by NeShawn Cox Dawson, has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____
Rick Reitzug

Committee Members _____
Ann Davis

_____
Kimberly Hewitt

_____
Date of Acceptance by Committee

_____
Date of Final Oral Examination

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> We are inevitably our brother's keeper because we are our brother's brother. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. —Dr. Martin King, Jr.

I began my parenthood journey as a single mother raising an African-American male in the rural South. The African Proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child," is a true testament of the challenges of rearing my son into a successful man. My personal and professional experiences are the driving force behind my research interest—the pervasive achievement gap of African-American males. The experiences that drive my interest in this social, economic, and political issue include the obstacles my son faced during his elementary through college years. Throughout my son's primary and secondary educational experiences, I had to advocate for the classes and teachers he needed to excel. Unfortunately, many African American parents are not afforded that same opportunity to select the best teachers for their sons. In most cases, high performing and/or academically gifted African-American male students are placed in remedial classes with novice teachers. According to the Schott Foundation for Public Education (2015), "Schools serving students from low-income, and minority families have fewer opportunities to learn advanced content and participate in Advance Placement (AP) courses, thus contributing to disparities in educational outcomes both in high school and beyond" (p.

42). As a result, these students never reach their full potential and are lost in the educational system.

My son attended a predominantly White university in North Carolina and was one of two African-American males majoring in engineering. During his senior year, he failed a required class for his major twice. When he met with his college advisor, she strongly encouraged him to leave the engineering program and, in fact, had already made plans for him to meet with an advisor in another department. He was extremely upset and discouraged about his advisor's advice to push him to quit the program. She never once suggested or arranged tutoring to help my son successfully complete the program. Darling-Hammond (2010) asserts, "Many teachers hold particularly low expectations of African American and Latino students, treat them more harshly than other students, discourage their achievement, and punish them disproportionately" (p. 208). This deficit-thinking orientation is experienced by many African-American males, creating a continual cycle of failure from generation to generation. I tried to encourage my son to stay the course. However, it was another professor who convinced him not to quit because he had one of the highest grades in her class. This professor had high expectations for my son and this motivated him to continue and complete his studies. My son's attitude shifted when she confirmed his abilities and his perceptions of himself as a student in the field of engineering. How many African-American male students are empowered by caring educators (e.g., as described in Reitzug & Patterson, 1998) who are willing to push and support them to excellence? Conversely, how many are not encouraged by their teachers and other educators?

During my son's high school years, I can vividly remember him telling me that the principal, a Black male, was "cool" because he played basketball with him and his friends after school. My son informed me that the principal was approachable and a positive role model to all the students at the school. The most powerful story emerged when a new student enrolled into the school and displayed inappropriate/disrespectful behaviors toward the principal during class change one day. My son and his friends approached the new student and told him to "chill out" because the principal is "good people." Because the principal established solid relationships with his students, they, in turn, looked out for him.

In education, there has been an emphasis on the three "Rs"—rigor, relevance, and relationships. On some level, there is a disconnect because many educators focus on rigor and relevance and dismiss the importance of relationships. When working with African-American males, it is critical to establish relationships. Barth (1990) opines, "The biggest problem besetting schools is the primitive quality of human relationships among children, parents, teachers and administrators" (p. 36). Advancing stakeholder relationships may be the key to empirically supported and asset-oriented interventions that will enable academic success of Black men (Warren, 2016). Are those relationships key to closing the achievement gap for African-American male students?

The purpose of this study was to examine the leadership practices of rural, African-American male principals working with African-American male students. It gives voice to the principals' experiences, perceptions, and relationships as African-American educational leaders in rural schools in North Carolina. I was interested in

exploring how their experiences contributed and influenced their leadership styles (practice) and the strategies they used to address achievement gaps for African-American male students in rural areas.

Interestingly, most of the research on education policy and reform has been primarily conducted in urban or suburban settings (Grooms, 2016; Williams & Grooms, 2016). Conversely, rural schools and principals face similar challenges and obstacles of deficit-thinking, inadequate resources, and high rural poverty, but may also face other conditions unique to the rural context (Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, & Reeves, 2012). This study attempted to capture the day-to-day work of African-American principals as they strive to improve student achievement and success for African-American males in rural schools.

According to the research, effective principal leadership is a potential driver or catalyst for change and for school improvement (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). School administrators contribute to school effectiveness and student achievement indirectly through actions to increase instructional practices, improve classroom conditions, and create a positive school culture (Cotton, 2003; Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger & Leithwood, 1994). Effective schools are led by principals who establish norms and values of high expectations for teachers and students (Pashiardis, Savvides, Lytra, & Angelidou, 2011). There is limited research on the educational leadership of African-American principals (Gooden, 2012; Tillman, 2008). However, Tillman (2008) notes, “Today, it is more important than ever that Black principal leaders bring their cultural knowledge and perspective to the school leadership practices” (p. 600).

Lomotey (1987) notes that Black principals are culturally linked to Black students and that this could contribute, directly and indirectly, to the success of Black students. What leadership practices do these principals possess to influence or make a difference with their Black male students? Riehl (2000) suggests,

> If practice is connected to identity, then it matters who administrators are. Studies of the beliefs and behaviors of women and persons of color who serve as administrators provide new insights into the dynamics of subjectivity and practice. It suggests that neither administrators themselves nor others involved with schools should ignore the knowledge, values, styles of action, and ways of being diverse administrators bring to their work. (pp. 70–71)

If identity matters, we can no longer ignore the influence or relationships African-American principals have with African-American students. In fact, establishing positive and caring relationships with African-American male students is critical to their academic performance in school (Warren, 2016). More importantly, could these positive relationships impact the Black/White achievement gaps while making educational and career opportunities available for upward mobility for all African-American male students?

Background of Study

For decades, there has been an educational focus to close the significant achievement gap between Black and White students (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Howard, Flennaugh, & Terry, 2012). The lack of academic achievement and success of African-American males has seemingly impacted every area of our society from the criminal justice system to the economic infrastructure. African-American males face many social

challenges—high school drop-out rates, drug abuse, incarceration, disproportional placement into special education, and stereotype threat. Lomotey (1993) argues,

> Regardless of the measures employed (e.g., standardized achievement tests, high school completion rates, suspension rates, special education placement, etc.), on average, African-American students fare poorly when compared to their European-American peers. (p. 395)

These conditions have the propensity to impede positive academic outcomes and lead to economic hardship for many African-American males.

The Black-White achievement gap has been linked to many contributing factors including parental involvement (Bryan & Henry, 2012; Hauser, 2014; Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998), socioeconomic status (Oates, 2009), and teachers' and school administrators' expectations (Khalifa, 2011). Many educational initiatives, such as Title I and No Child Left Behind, have been designed to alleviate the pervasive achievement gap. Most of the current strategies and practices such as remedial programs, special education services, and class tracking are designed to improve student performance and achievement for minority students; unfortunately, these same practices create a continual system or cycle of failure (Darling-Hammond, 2010). There is a plethora of theories and research findings detailing why and how the achievement gap exists, ranging from perspectives grounded in critical race theory to the deficit thinking paradigm (Walker, 2011).

Even the *Brown v. Board Education* U.S. Supreme Court decision promises the right to equal access and opportunities to education for all students. It seems that promise has not come to fruition for all African-American males, although the number of minority

students attending college is increasing, hence creating many Black professionals. Kaba (2005) reports,

> The 21st Century has witnessed the considerable gains that African-Americans have made in education attainment in their American experience. There is a correlation between increase in college degree attainment and the economic success of Black families in the United States. (p. 21)

Despite oppression and social injustices, the American Dream is still a possibility for African-American males. Indeed, within my own profession, there are quite a few successful African-American male teachers, and some have risen to the role of principal. So, how can understanding the experiences of African-American males who have gone on to successful careers as educators and educational leaders improve the academic outcomes for current African-American male students? Without a doubt, society can conclude that African-American males have made substantial contributions to American communities; however, the continual need to close achievement gaps, to decrease drop-out rates, to reduce school discipline suspensions, and to reassess special education placements is imperative for this group.

As schools become more diverse, principals must rethink schooling and move beyond the status quo by ensuring all students, particularly African-American males, have a chance for college options and career advancement. Lomotey (1993) suggests, "Schooling will increase the likelihood for individuals and groups to improve their status and make greater contributions to their communities and to the society at large" (p. 396). To sustain our democracy, our society must improve the educational outcomes for all African-American males.

Problem Statement and Research Questions

Many minority students are unprepared for higher education opportunities and career advancements. Black students, particularly African-American males, tend to perform poorly on standardized tests and account for high numbers of high school dropouts. More importantly, African-American males experience the largest percentage of incarceration rates and exclusionary discipline (Cook, Duong, McIntosh, Fiat, Pullman, & McGinnis, 2018; Noguera, 2008). Darling-Hammond (2010) argues, "We can ill afford to maintain the structural inequalities in access to knowledge and resources that produce persistent and profound barriers to educational opportunity for large numbers of our citizens" (p. 25). Eliminating barriers and changing mindsets and practices, especially for those individuals who work closely with African-American children, are essential elements to narrow the achievement gap.

My passion is to develop research-based strategies and practices to help improve student achievement for African-American males in K-12 classrooms. The major goal of this study was to understand the ways in which African-American male principals support African-American male students in rural schools. The study also explored how the principals' personal and professional experiences shaped their perspectives on educational practices governing African-American male students.

My work focused on African-American male principals and how they supported African-American males in K-12 rural schools. The study delved into the leadership practices and work performed that sought greater equity and social justice for African-

American males in rural school districts in North Carolina. The study's research questions are:

1. How do rural, African-American male principals support African-American male students at their schools?
2. How do African-American principals perceive their past experiences, including as students and educators, and how do these influence their current work with African-American male students?

Definition of Terms

In the context of this study, the following terms are used:

African-American/Black male—refers to ethnic/racial group of men of African descent living in America. African-American or Black male is used interchangeable throughout the study.

Achievement gap—the disparity of academic achievement between African-American and White students based on standardized testing.

Theory of Acting White—a theoretical phenomenon that Fordham and Ogbu (1986) proposed to explain the academic disengagement of African-Americans. The framework holds that African-American males purposely underperform or underachieve in school to be accepted by their African-American peer group.

Urban—a densely populated area where the population is 50,000 or more people (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2014).

Urbanized Cluster—an urban area with population between 2,500 and 49,999 people (NCES, 2014).

Rural Fringe-Census—a rural territory that is less than or equal to five miles from an urbanized area and is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster (NCES, 2014).

Rural Distant-Census—a rural territory that is more than five miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area (NCES, 2014).

Rural Remote-Census—a rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and it also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster (NCES, 2014).

Rural—a territory that encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area.

Mentoring—a one-on-one relationship between caring and trusting adults and a youth who needs support (Marzano, 2003).

Social Justice—the ability to advocate, lead, and keep at the center of one's practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in schools the United States by addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools and school practices (Theoharis, 2007, 2008).

Summary

In the introduction, I shared my son's K-12 educational experiences in a rural school district and the challenges he faced as a student. I wanted to highlight his struggles during his college years, only to speak of those positive relationships that were developed with a caring professor who pushed him to excel and changed the trajectory of his life. As a nation, we must be concerned about the educational and social disparities in

achievement and opportunities that affect our African-American males in rural school settings. In Chapter II, it is a review of the literature pertinent to this study as it relates to rurality, connecting to African-American males, and challenges in education for African-American male students and principals. I address Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the theoretical framework. In Chapter III, I discuss the methodology and research design for this qualitative study. Also, I introduce the principals leading rural schools. Chapter IV consists of the finding and data analysis from the principals' interviews. The last chapter is my conclusion and final thoughts.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

Chapter II provides a review of literature pertinent to this study. The first section reviews the literature on rural schools and their unique characteristics. The second section outlines the connection and commitment African-American principals have to African-American male students. The third section focuses on the challenges principals, especially African-American males, encounter as educational leaders. The fourth section looks closely at the research on issues that impedes the success of African-American male students in the educational setting. The last section utilizes critical race theory and how race and stereotypes shape social constructs of African-American male principals as ineffectual leaders and analyzes the achievement disparity of African-American male students in rural schools.

Education in Rural Schools and Communities

Nearly one-third of American students attend rural schools (NCES, 2014). Rural locales are classified in one of three categories: fringe, distant, and remote. *Rural Fringe* is census-defined as a rural area that is less than or equal to five miles from an urbanized area and is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster. *Rural Distant* is a rural territory that is more than five miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area. *Rural Remote* is census-defined as a rural territory that is more than 25 miles from

an urbanized area and also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster (NCES, 2014). Rural locales have a significant impact school leadership, teacher recruitment, fiscal resources, and community values.

Rural schools and their communities have unique characteristics along with their own set of challenges and strengths. Many rural schools are in areas where there is high poverty, low population, limited resources, and human isolation (Budge, 2006). These schools are positioned to do more with less. By the same token, the families within these communities often struggle with the same problems (Witte & Sheridan, 2011). These factors have a residual impact on how schools operate, and the type of principal that is needed to help overcome challenges of rurality.

Rural principals are confronted with many responsibilities and day-to-day challenges along with the essential duties of their jobs. They must contend with other complex rural-specific schooling issues while trying to create educational opportunities for students (Burt & Boyd, 2016; Williams & Grooms, 2016). For example, rural principals have difficulty recruiting and retaining teachers, especially in high needs areas due to lower teacher salaries (Burt & Boyd, 2016). Unquestionably, hard-to-staff schools present a major challenge for rural principals and schools; therefore, rural districts and schools resort to "grow your own" initiatives (Burt & Boyd, 2016) designed to retain teachers as a way to offset the teacher shortage.

Even the isolation of rurality presents its own challenges, often students in rural schools are not privy to afterschool programs like the Boys and Girls Club and the YMCA. Geographic isolation poses inconveniences for rural communities and limited

many students to social and educational opportunities that are afforded to students living in urban and city areas.

On the contrary, small rural schools are credited for creating a positive school climate and maintaining orderly learning environments. According to the research, rural schools have fewer disciplinary problems and a high level of student-faculty engagement (Kotok, Kryst, & Hagedorn, 2016). Teachers are more connected to their students in rural schools which give opportunity for the teachers to know the students and the families within the community (Burt & Boyd, 2016). It is those relationships that define the close tight knit relationships nature of rural communities (Burt & Boyd, 2016; Butera & Costello, 2010).

Another relative strength of rurality is the connectedness the people have with each other within the community (Johnson & Zoellner, 2016). Rural people are inextricably linked to the community and its heritage. According to Duncan (1999),

> These relationships and norms are reinforced by overt action of those who benefit from them, but they are also maintained through memory and tradition, reputation and family history. People know one another's families across generations, their good deeds and bad, power and vulnerability, successes and failures. Boom and bust cycles of the economy, acts of resistance and accommodation, are recorded not only in official historical records, but also in the people's decisions about work, family, or migration. The structure of daily life that takes shape over time is taken for granted. Because new ideas and new resources rarely penetrate this environment that the powerful have deliberately kept closed off—worlds apart—from the larger society, people form their cultural tool kit in the context of the relationships and norms they know. Their immediate social context shapes who they become and how they see their options, both as individuals and as a community. (p. 239)

Furthermore, rural people exhibit strong values and identity; they are not easily moved by outside influences, thereby making it difficult for the acceptance of "outsiders" and some rural cultures instill distrust of "outsiders" for fear of being judged by others (Witte & Sheridan, 2011). Ideally, it is essential for educational leaders to the know the community at large and build a trust among stakeholders (Ashton & Duncan, 2012).

Rural communities share a common bond or sense of place (Budge, 2006; Maxwell, Locke, & Scheurich, 2014). In many cases, the bond is established by spoken or unspoken historical connections or cultural traditions. Budge (2006) suggests,

> There are six habits of place as tools to examine rural school and communities. These habits may have the greatest influence of educational leaders' belief about the purposes for schooling and theories of action related to student learning. The six habits are (a) connectedness (b) development of identity and culture (c) interdependence with the land (d) spirituality (e) ideology and politics, and (f) activism and civic engagement. (p. 3)

Jackson's (2010) research suggests the social and cultural practices within rural communities are significant to the discourse of rural schooling which are constructed to maintain tradition or the status quo. In her research, she examined four strategic conditions or practices that advance and condition discourse in rural schools:

1. A maintenance of traditions (doing things the way they have always been done for the sake of tradition).
2. A privilege to access (access to certain aspects of education for some students and not others by virtue of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability).
3. A unity of the community (the ostensibly seamless connections among school, family, and community).
4. A control of the public image (presenting a certain, unified image to the public). (p. 78)

This study suggests that rural schools cannot escape the powers of the rural community and traditions where rural places yearn to hang onto traditional identities (Jackson, 2010).

Importance of Parental and Community Involvement

Research studies assert that parental and community involvement is necessary to improve student achievement (Hilgendorf, 2012; Horsford, 2010). Witte and Sheridan (2011) found, "Given the limited resources evident in many rural communities, family-school partnerships can be especially beneficial for students in rural schools" (p. 3). Under these circumstances, African-American school leaders must take on the task of establishing or building parent-community-school relationships in rural areas as one step for addressing the achievement gap for the African-American students and for building relational trust between the parents and school officials.

School and family relationships are vital to closing the achievement gap (Bryan & Henry, 2012). Moreover, parental support and advocacy are key factors in helping African-American males succeed academically. According to the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), African-American students are less likely than White students to have their parents involved in their schooling. Sperling and Vaughan (2009) assert that parents' attitudes toward the U.S. school system have an impact on the achievement gap.

Research by DuFour and Eaker (1998) outlined several strategies to create more productive school-parent partnerships:

- Coordinate and distribute information regarding cultural, recreational, academic, health, social, and other resources for families in the community.

- Work with community partners to organize special programs and events, such as health fairs, technology nights, summer recreational programs, job fairs, etc., to inform families of community resources and services.
- Develop partnerships with area businesses and service groups to create a speaker's bureau, coordinate job shadowing and mentoring experiences for students, and provide businesses with access to school facilities and personnel.
- Establish "pen pal" or email relationships between students and senior citizens and/or business representatives.
- Create community service opportunities for students.

More specifically to minority students and parents, Hrabowski et al. (1998) completed a study with the Meyerhoff Scholars Program that examines the habits, attitudes, behaviors, perspectives, and strategies of successful African-American males and their parents. The implications of the study uncovered several key factors that lead to the success for minority males:

> (a) the importance of reading, beginning with parents (especially mother) who read to their sons at a young age; (b) the parents' view that education is both necessary and valuable; (c) active encouragement on the part of parents toward academic success; (d) close interaction between the parents and their son's teachers; (e) strong parental interest in homework; and (f) considerable verbal praise. (p. 194)

Administrators, teachers, and district level personnel must build partnerships with parents as key stakeholders in the educational process to promote success for African American males. Given these points, African-American principals who work in rural

locations must situate themselves to develop powerful relationships with students, families, and the community.

Connecting with African-American Males

Many times, African-American principals can relate to African-American males socially and culturally, by relating to their life experiences and the pressure from societal perceptions of them as third-class citizens (Andrews, 2016). Creating social and cultural connections with African-American males is critical to improving their achievement, while fostering relational trust with educators. Lomotey (1993) found African-American school leaders play a key role in bringing about change for African-American students, especially if the administrators view their culture as significant. The principals in his study had to navigate between two roles: personal (ethno-humanist) and professional (bureaucrat/administrator). The ethno-humanist role identity describes how these leaders identified and connected with the African-American students. The implication of Lomotey's study suggests that African-American leaders need to adopt an ethno-humanist stance when working with African-American students to help these students establish identity and sense of community.

Principals must consider their diverse student populations to effectively address the academic, social, and behavior needs of each student. Lomotey (1993) argues, "Academic success is not enough. What is needed, these principals contend, is an education about one's culture, about life, and about where these African-American students fit in the society and in the world" (p. 397). African-American principals are viewed as role models for African-American boys in the school setting. Tillman (2003)

posits, “More importantly, Black principals have a direct impact on the lives of students they served; as role models, they provide images that will inspire and motivate Black students” (p. 110). Even during the Pre-*Brown* era, African-American principals were the backbone of the community, serving as advocates and change agents to improve the academic and social needs within that community. Therefore, they were held in high esteem, and oftentimes the only ones formally educated. African-American principals were committed to the education of Black children and worked with Black leaders to establish schools for these students (Tillman, 2003). In fact, African-American principals were the central figures (Tillman, 2003) regarding the education of African-American students, and they were trusted activists (Pollard, 1997) within the community.

During Post-*Brown*, these principals continued to strive to provide social justice and equity for this group of students in desegregated schools. Many African-American principals were fired or demoted from the principalships and assigned to less desirable jobs; as a result, this impacted the future aspirations of African-Americans leading as principals (Karpinski, 2006). Consequently, those same desegregated schools become segregated again due to the racial makeup and socioeconomic status of the community.

However, African-American principals share a connection with African-American students and they have a commitment to their education. It continues to be the belief that education is the key for upward mobility in America.

African-American principals have a strong commitment to African-American students and their learning potential (Lomotey, 1989), but are they willing to combat structural and systemic inequities in schools? Khalifa’s (2011) 2-year qualitative

ethnography outlined the work of a school administrator who narrowed the achievement gap and increased the graduation rates for African-American students at an alternative school. This study provided insight on the importance of strong leadership and a clear vision for excellence and equity. One of the implications is that teachers' negative expectations intensify the absence of solid academic progress for minority students. As a result, many African-American students are labeled and placed into the lowest academic tracks (Hrabowski et al., 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Oates, 2009).

Furthermore, Khalifa (2011) suggested some teachers allow African-American students to disengage from academics and social expectations to eliminate possible conflicts within the educational environment. Teachers are "making deals" with minority students due to fear of misbehaviors during instructional time. Consequently, teacher fear and acquiescence are major issues that lead to exclusionary practices that hinder academic progress for minority students. Hence, the principal in Khalifa's study refused to allow his teachers to have negative perceptions and expectations of the students and parents and purposely demonstrated high expectations for the teachers and students throughout the school day. The principal worked to establish trusting and positive relationships with the parents, which ultimately influenced student achievement. Positive relationships with parents require teachers to have open communication with them and to make the classroom environment more conducive to learning. Khalifa asserted that principals have an important role in changing the educational outcomes for minority students by altering the educational landscape to meet their academic and social needs.

Significance of Mentoring Relationships

Even, mentoring relationship could be beneficial to the academic and social success for African-American male students. Mentoring is a one-on-one relationship between caring and trusting adults and a youth who needs support (Marzano, 2003). Mentoring works when meaningful and trusting relationships are established. In most cases, the mentor provides guidance, coaching, and interpersonal and psychosocial supports to the mentee. Developed over time, relationships can support the academic achievement and emotional support for the mentee.

Research by Davis (2003) asserts another explanation for the underachievement of African-American males that is centered on gender identity. These males view academic achievement as feminine and as inhibiting their masculinity. The presence of committed and successful African-American men in the school environment is a solution to change their views about education.

As other possible solutions to alleviate school-related problems, community-based programs were created by the African-American community and church organizations in efforts to provide mentoring for African-American males (Noguera, 2003). Afterschool and summer school programs, community organizations, and churches can provide young people with access to positive role models and societal support that can help buffer youth for the pressures within their school and communities (Noguera, 2003).

However, Kelly and Dixon (2014) assert,

> Mentoring goes beyond role modeling and it is clear that the original intent of mentoring is a relationship that goes beyond pure friendship and a supervisory relationship; instead, mentoring seeks to directly enhance the professional development of the protégé while indirectly (and sometimes directly) providing beneficial outcomes for the mentor as well. (p. 504)

These relationships are mutually beneficial.

Jekielek, Moore, and Hair (2002) compared students in a mentored and non-mentored group. They found that the mentored students:

- Were more optimistic about their academics;
- Were less likely to miss or skip school or class;
- Engaged in fewer antisocial activities;
- Were less likely to initiate drug or alcohol use;
- Earned higher GPAs;
- Were less likely to hit someone;
- Were less likely to lie to a parent;
- Experienced better peer relationships;
- Were more likely to give emotional support to classmates and friends (as cited in Jensen, 2009, p. 89)

Jackson, Sealey-Ruiz, and Watson (2014) assert mentoring relationships transcend the curriculum. The education for African-American males requires positive relationships and the ethos of care through which they can connect. In other words, mentoring is essential to enhance the social and academic development of African-American males.

Influence of Media and Hip-Hop Culture

There is a perception that African-American males have struggled to find a place in society as productive citizens. Is the plight of African-American males as dim as suggested by social imagery portrayed by the media, and by the public's perception? Howard et al. (2012) suggest, "Social imagery frequently becomes reified through the use of tools, language, forms of media, constructed knowledge, and the purported experiences that are displayed and widely distributed about a particular group" (p. 86). Land, Mixon, Butcher, and Harris (2014) assert that negative cultural stereotypes and perceptions have portrayed African-American males as thugs, criminals, dropouts, and drug dealers.

Palmer and Maramba (2011) concluded that critical pedagogy provides a new conceptual lens for understanding the educational disengagement of African-American men. They used the tenets of critical theory to explain the achievement disparity. The media is a hidden curriculum designed to discourage academic achievement for African-American males. Palmer and Maramba suggest, "We have posited the media acts as a hidden curriculum and uses negative images to stymie the educational engagement of African American men" (p. 441). Parents play a critical role in helping their children develop healthy resistance to racial discrimination (Carter, 2008). Not only should African-American parents have a partnership in educational matters, but they must censor the negative images and messages to which their sons are exposed by the media.

Based on the dominant narrative, the influences of the Hip-Hop culture impact how African-American males perceive the importance of school. The images portrayed

by music videos and Hollywood movies of fast money and luxurious lifestyles sometimes cause African-American males to devalue education and the educational system altogether for a life on the streets. Mocombe (2011) purports the achievement gap is not linked to the racial and cultural basis, but rather is correlated with social structures of inequality. This study examined the idea that African-American students do not view education as the means to upward mobility. This research outlined that for many African-American young people, success is based on the Hip-Hop culture's definition of upward economic mobility. Hollywood and the music industry depict false economic security and social mobility by encouraging African-American males to devalue education while portraying music videos and drug-dealing movies as a way to obtain money and power in this society.

However, the influence of rap music for today's youth is the premise that it tells a story about many of the issues and experiences African-American males face in America. Tafari (2013) posits, "Black boys are fascinated with Hip-Hop and so invested in rap music because their stories are being told. Hip-Hop is a part of the Black male identity and affects how boys and men think and behave and with what they identify" (p. 53). Ogbu (2004) notes,

> Black music was yet another aspect of cultural evolution for expressing difference and opposition to White domination and White ways. Blacks used their music not only to entertain, lighten the burden of their labor and other sufferings but also as a means of communication. (p. 9)

The influence of Hip-Hop has a big impact with African-American males across America. It has created its own culture, language, dress, and style—even inspiring instructional practices using rap to teach concepts and skills.

Challenges of Principals

Today's principals are faced with many challenges with educating a diverse student population. Riehl (2000) notes, "Thus, school leaders in every era have had to ponder both the rhetoric and the reality of how they address questions of diversity in school" (p. 56). Over the last decade, the dynamics of schooling have changed, even for rural schools and districts. As American schools shift in dealing with race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, and sexual orientation, the need for inclusive practices is critical so that all students can actively participate and succeed in our educational system. Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, and Glass (2005) suggest, "Reforms centered on student learning require changes in the nature of schooling that in turn require more inclusive discourse and more democratic decision-making processes in schools" (p. 63). American schools must focus on social transformation in order to eradicate social injustices, inequalities, and non-inclusive practices for historically marginalized or oppressed students. Therefore, effectively navigating the multifaceted roles of a successful, hardworking principal can create unheralded stress, which ultimately may lead to burnout.

Workload Obligations and Stress

As educational leaders, many African-American principals are faced with numerous social, political, cultural, and educational challenges. Consequently, these challenges cause frustration and/or burnout from the stressors of the job and workload

obligations (Barth, 1990). West, Peck, and Reitzug (2010) depict the changing job description of urban principals and the psychological impact of the job. Their study examined 17 urban principals from diverse backgrounds in K-12 education "to help illuminate the psychological impact of overloaded obligations and excessive constituent expectations" (p. 245). The analysis of the data is richly descriptive, giving the principals a voice about stress in their job.

In today's society, the challenges of an administrator are numerous and can exert a toll on one's mental and physical well-being. Gooden (2012) asserts that urban, African-American principals care extensively about their students and the job but may lose themselves in the process. Theoharis (2008) studied seven urban principals and the resistance encountered in their efforts to advance equity and social justice. These leaders worked as change agents to empower their African American students to view the world through an African-centered lens. The work of such a principal extended beyond academics, thus adding another level of stress to their jobs.

The top three reasons principals leave the profession are due to excessive time demands, stress, and the heavy work load (Barth, 1990; see Table 1). Therefore, Barth (1990) concludes that the reasons principals leave the principalship has much to do with the changing realities of the position.

Table 1

Reasons Principals Leave the Profession

Reason	Percent
Excessive demands	56%
Stress (emotional health)	52%
Excessive time demand	56%
Heavy work load	51%
Desire for change	40%
Fatigue	37%
Lack of support from superiors	35%
Courts/legislation	35%
Lack of teacher professionalism	35%
Student discipline	29%
Student apathy	28%

Note. Source: Barth, 1990, p. 65

Dismantling Teachers' Negative Perceptions

Educators' expectations play a critical role in student achievement for historically marginalized students. Students have the propensity to rise to the expectations that are set for them by their teachers and administrators. Skrla and Scheurich (2001) argued that deficit thinking, which is the ideology that students who fail or underachieve in school do so because of alleged internal deficiencies, must be eliminated by educators through professional development and training. Similarly, Cooper (2003) asserts, "Data from low-income and working-class African-American mothers suggests that teacher education programs must be instrumental in training the types of teachers that can educate and empower culturally diverse students" (p. 114). Teachers must be critically reflective of their practice and contend with their belief systems.

Deficit thinking is deeply embedded in educational practices and pervades schools that serve children from low-income homes and children of color. Skrla and Scheurich (2001) add, “Deficit thinking is the dominant paradigm that shapes U.S. educators’ explanations for widespread and persistent school failure among children from low-income homes and children of color” (p. 235). To close the achievement and opportunity gaps, educators must be willing to deal with biases, stereotypes, and prejudices. Professional development on cultural diversity can provide educators with tools to combat these negative emotions and can provide a foundation to ensure there is a paradigm shift in practices that will encourage equity and social justice for all students.

Poor and minority students are tracked in low-level classes (Palmer & Maramba, 2011) and placed in special education (Howard & Reynolds, 2008) or remedial programs, thus increasing the already existing learning gap that causes students to be left behind. In many cases, marginalized or oppressed students must confront tracking systems (Rubin & Noguera, 2004; Theoharis, 2008) which weaken their educational opportunities and career advancements due to lack of appropriate instruction and deficit thinking by educators. Darling-Hammond (2007) asserts, “Separate schools and [separate] tracks undermine democracy by segregating students by race, language, and social class, and by encouraging silence and separation when communication and connections are needed” (p. 62). Sperling and Vaughan (2009) opined similar findings, “People’s faulty beliefs about what is causing the gap lead them to support reform policies that perpetuate, rather than resolve, racial differences in achievement” (p. 146). Misconceptions and stereotypes

breed low expectations and deficit thinking, which consequently increase the achievement and opportunity gaps for minority students.

Oates (2009) argues, "Self-fulfilling prophesies occur when students perform in a manner that validates erroneous teacher-perceptions" (p. 421). Low expectations and negative perceptions are major reasons for the lack of student engagement and academic achievement and success for African-American males. Similar research by Darling-Hammond (2010) concludes, "Many teachers hold particularly low expectations of African-American and Latino students, treat them more harshly than other students, discourage their achievement, and punish them disproportionately" (p. 208). Research indicates that this perpetual cycle of low student expectations reinforces the Black-White achievement gap (Khalifa, 2011). Research by Margolis (2011) notes,

> The lasting effects of low expectations, a lack of access to rigorous courses, and de facto tracking practices are that African American and Latino/a students are far more likely to be judged as having learning deficits, and to be placed disproportionately in low-track remedial programs where they have less access to high-status knowledge, powerful learning environments and resources (University of California Accord, 2006). (p. 42)

More importantly, there is a need for principals to provide professional development opportunities to assist educational leaders, guidance counselors, and teachers with setting high expectations for African-American males.

Ladson-Billings (1994) argues that culturally-relevant teaching improves student achievement and self-esteem for minority students. Teachers who work successfully with African-American students use culturally relevant pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (1995) suggests, "Culturally-relevant teaching fosters the kinds of social interactions in the

classroom that supports the individual in the group context. Students feel a part of a collective effort designed to encourage academic and cultural excellence" (p. 76). Students become part of a community of learners, and they are respected as individuals. Culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995) is a practice that teachers believe each student has self-worth and can succeed regardless of race. Additionally, Ladson-Billings (1995), who actively participated in the classrooms of exemplary teachers of African-American students, noted that in their culturally-relevant pedagogy the teachers:

- believed that all the students were capable of academic success,
- saw their pedagogy as art—unpredictable, always in the process of becoming,
- saw themselves as members of the community,
- saw teaching as way to give back to the community, and
- believed in a Freiran notion of "teaching as mining" or pulling knowledge out. (p. 479)

In order to connect with African-American males, teachers and principals must dismantle faulty beliefs about them as a collective. More importantly, they must create a classroom or school culture where these students are valued and respected and provide instruction that is culturally relevant to meet their individual learning needs.

Challenges African-American Male Students Encounter

Acting White

Principals and teachers encounter some unique challenges when working with African-American male students. Many African-American males fear being labeled as a "nerd" or "geek," so these students underperform academically. Consequently, changing this mindset is a difficult process for educators and administrators. The theoretical

concept of "acting White" is one of the reasons academically talented Black male students purposely underachieve in school (Harper, 2006) and camouflage (Ogbu, 2004) their intellectual abilities in order to be accepted and received favorably by their African-American peer group. African-American males feel they should underperform academically because of the lack of peer support (Hrabowski et al., 1998).

Resistance or opposition to the White culture has been deeply engrained in the psyche of many African-Americans, originating from the oppression and brutality of slavery. The ramifications of slavery continue to plague ways African-Americans and Whites interpret cultural and intellectual differences between both groups and shape the identity of African-Americans as a collective group (Ogbu, 2004). The academic achievements of Black Americans have been deeply formed by the viewpoints of White America as being intellectually inferior. Many White Americans refuse to acknowledge the academic efforts of African-Americans, and in turn, some African-Americans begin to question their own intellectual capabilities. Fries-Britt (1997) notes,

> Behaviors associated with academic excellence and intellectual pursuits have historically been linked to Whites, particularly the White middle class. More recently, members of Pacific Islander groups have been classified as having strong academic habits of high intelligence, even higher than those of Whites. An unfavorable image has often been projected about African-American and Hispanic or Latino intelligence. (p. 68)

Ogbu (2004) concludes, "Black Americans began to develop their sense of collective identity and of belonging together during slavery. Collective experience of oppression and exploitation caused them to develop a sense of a Black community which embodied their collective racial identity" (p. 8). One important aspect of Black collective identity is

not “selling out” to the White culture and to remain loyal to Blacks and the Black community.

Acting White is a major barrier and prevents many potential high achievers from obtaining academic success, consequently creating learning environments where educators must help these students internalize that being smart is an acceptable social behavior. According to Harper (2006), “For African-American males, nowhere is this oppression more commonplace than in schools, the context in which an achiever is supposedly accused by his same-race peers of acting White” (p. 339).

Similar research by Stinson (2011) focuses on the “voices” of four academically successful African-American men in their early 20s, and how they successfully negotiated the burden of acting White. This study found “African-American males must adopt a strong racial identity by maintaining pride in one’s culture or Blackness while assimilating or negotiating the hegemonic of success in the dominant culture” (p. 54). The ideology of “acting White” stigmatizes African-American males who, when viewed as being smart or talented, are perceived by some of their peers as abandoning their Black cultural identity—this is one of the explanations why African-American males are disengaged in school. Carter’s (2008) study underscores the critical need for parents for teach their sons their heritage, to share positive contributions of African-American males, and to show how they can make a significant difference to society. A focus on African-American students’ racial and achievement self-conceptions may provide insight into why these students enact adaptive or maladaptive behaviors for academic success in school.

Wright (2015) suggests that Healthy Racial-Ethnic Identity (HREI) is critical to the development of academic success because it empowers minorities to dismantle societal and schooling inequalities and oppressions. Wright asserts that African-American males who maintain a Healthy Racial-Ethnic Identity enjoy high levels of academic success and high self-esteem when they are able to connect to their culture. Wright's study explored how African-American males interpret their academic success and resilience when they encounter the societal notion that they are "Acting White" (Wright, 2015). Wright concluded that young African-American men within a nurturing and supportive school environment can use their racial-ethnic identity to promote their own school success. Strong academic success is directly connected to strong positive racial identity, enabling African-American males to overcome negative messages and to stay focused on school achievement.

Research by Harper (2015) on African-American and Latino males in 40 public high schools provides a platform to understand factors males have in common when academic success is achieved. The qualitative study provided the participants a "voice" about their educational experiences and allowed the minority males the opportunity to dismantle negative stereotypes and perceptions about African-American and Latino males through their storytelling. According to Harper,

> Master narratives are dominant accounts that are often generally accepted as universal truths about a particular contexts and groups (e.g., all urban schools are dangerous, nothing good happens in Compton or Camden, and Latino families do not care about education). (p. 145)

Therefore, the counternarratives allow the African-American male participants an opportunity to tell their stories from their own perspectives. The research reveals the policies, practices, and structures (i.e., resource inequities, racism) that undermine success for African-American and Latino young men are in need of urgent redress. Most importantly, success can be obtained in the most unlikely places when educators, scholars, and other choose to set aside deficit lenses.

Academic and Discipline Disparities

For years, a principal's main responsibility was to maintain student discipline and order within the school environment. However, there has been a paradigm shift with the roles and responsibilities of principals (Barth, 1990). This era of accountability, rigorous academic standards, and high stakes testing has pushed school administrators to explore a wider range of effective instructional practices (Fusarelli & Militello, 2012) and services for all students, particularly African American males. This spotlights the increasing need for principals to focus on instruction and professional development to improve teacher and student performance within classrooms.

In 2012-2013, the estimated graduation rates for North Carolina were 61% for African-American males, 63% for Latino males, and 77% for White males (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015). According to the national proficiency rates in Grade 8 National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP), 12% of African-American males, 17% of Latino males, and 38% of White males are proficient in reading. The staggering results indicate a continual need to address the academic disparity among

African-American males. Their underperformance in school has been the subject of debate for decades.

Children who live in poverty often come to school behind their more affluent peers in terms of literacy and language development (Parrett & Budge, 2012). Literacy is the foundation for learning and the inability to read can be challenging for any student. African-American males have been characterized as struggling readers. Tatum and Muhammad (2012) noted, "Response to Intervention (RTI) has been widely adopted in schools for student who struggle with reading" (p. 447). The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction is deploying the implementation of Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) formerly known as Response to Intervention (RTI). The first stage of implementation is to examine core instruction to ensure all students are learning grade level material and teachers are providing appropriate instruction to meet the grade level standards. However, MTSS has forced schools and school districts to look closely at individual students' performance, particularly those students who are at risk, with the intention to close learning gaps through research-based interventions and continual progress monitoring of student performance.

Intervention is the way to ensure all students are getting what they need, and it closes gaps in learning. Fountas and Pinnell (1996) suggest:

- The intervention is delivered by the best teachers.
- The intervention has a strong diagnostic component.
- The intervention focuses on the individual child.
- The intervention provides abundant practice in reading and writing.
- The intervention has a teacher-training program that ensures excellence.

- The intervention accounts for every child-an intervention program must be based on solid research and must include record keeping that documents progress in every child when it is used. (pp. 193–194)

Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera (2010) note, “Low achievement is another variable that may contribute to the racial discipline gap” (p. 61). The results are concerning because of the strong correlation between the achievement gap for minority students and the link to the school-to-prison pipeline (Fenning & Rose, 2007) and underemployment.

The school-to-prison pipeline (STPP) involves a set of interactions with students, adults, school personnel, and gatekeepers of outcomes that contribute to a cycle of negative encounters (e.g., dropout, delinquency, arrest, and incarceration) for a disproportionate number of students of color (Osher et al., 2012). For example, African-American students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than that of White students. On average, 5% of White students are suspended, compared to 16% of African-American students (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). The disproportionately high suspension and expulsion rates for students of color reflects exclusionary disciplinary practices.

Principals are the key change agents in the discipline process; they must create positive and nurturing learning environments and provide staff development on disciplinary practices and policies. Research by Gonsoulin, Zablocki, and Leone (2012) examined the importance of staff development in shaping ways in which schools respond to students’ misbehavior. They concluded:

> Supporting schools and communities through staff development to implement these practices can put an end to destructive, ineffective, and punitive practices

> that contribute to the STPP. Effective staff development is a key to creating safer schools and more effective learning communities. (p. 317)

When dealing with disciplinary issues, principals must see themselves as social justice leaders and the advocates of change for African-American males. They must use their power and voice to address racism and advocate for justice (DeMatthews, Carey, Olivarez, & Saeedi, 2017; Fenning & Rose, 2007). DeMatthews et al. (2017) purported,

> Principals must see themselves as the ushers of either the school-to-prison pipeline, or the school-to-success pipeline. Scholars, practitioners, and communities must care about racial justice, the school-to-prison pipeline, and its origins in schools. Their programs, policies, and daily practices must reflect a caring stance. (p. 550)

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) emerged from legal scholarship as an offset from the advancements of the Civil Rights Movement and the Critical Legal Studies Movement that were hindered by covert forms of racism. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) define critical race theory "as a movement designed to seek to transform relationships among race, racism, and power" (p. 159). The work of Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado has been critical with the development of new theories and strategies to address racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). CRT has spread to other disciplines and now is used to understand issues in education. Today, this theory provides a contextual lens that illuminates structural and cultural aspects of racism and oppression in education as real while documenting minority groups as disenfranchised from equal access to resources and opportunities.

CRT's early history began in the 1970s when the late law professor, Derrick Bell, challenged the passing of the Civil Rights Legislation. He interrogated reasons the Supreme Court finally enacted the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Bell theorized this judicial action was in the best interest of the elite Whites and "not the moral qualms over black's plight" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 23). During this time period, the United States was in the midst of the Cold War and did not want negative images for the mistreatment of its Black, Brown, and Asian citizens. The United States wanted to preserve their international image as human rights advocates (Khalifa, Dunbar, & Douglas, 2013), so segregated schools were desegregated. As a result, the interests of the Blacks and Whites converged.

Henceforth, interest convergence has become a major theme of CRT, highlighting the belief that the advances for people of color propel forward only to serve in the best interests of the elite are at hand. Furthermore, Gooden (2012) quotes,

> Relating to racism being ordinary is the principle of interest convergence, which holds that civil rights advances in history for Blacks happened only when those interests converged with the interests of elite Whites and changing economic conditions. Derrick Bell (1980, 2004), regarded as the intellectual father of CRT, cogently argues this point in several seminal works using the *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)* case as his most convincing example. He asks simply why the Supreme Court suddenly sided with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in this landmark decision in 1954 after years of fighting desegregate schools. Bell's answer to his query and riveting conclusion is that domestic and world considerations drove the decision instead of moral qualms over Black people's experiences. (p. 69)

In fact, DeCuir and Dixson (2003) purport,

> Citing the limited and precarious gains of the *Brown* decision, Bell argues that losses in terms of human capital by way of the dismissal of scores of African-American teachers and administrators, school closing in Black neighborhoods, and the limited access to high-quality curricula in the form of tracking, inflated admission criteria, and other factors, have made the so-called gains from *Brown* questionable. (p. 28)

According to Carter (2008), there are five basic tenets of CRT:

1. racism as normal in American society and developing strategies for exposing it in its various forms;
2. the significance of experiential knowledge and employing storytelling to "analyze the myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that make up the common culture about race and invariably render blacks and other minorities one-down" (citing Delgado, 1995, p. xiv);
3. challenging traditional and dominant discourse and paradigms on race, gender, and class by showing how these social constructs intersect to affect people of color;
4. a commitment to social justice; and
5. a transdisciplinary perspective. (p. 15)

For the purpose of this study, I will focus on three major themes of CRT: storytelling, critique of liberalism, and intersectionality.

Critical Race Theory, as a theoretical framework, provides a medium to analyze and to examine the achievement disparities in education for African-American male students in rural schools from the "voice" of the African-American principals. Storytelling, one of the tenets of CRT, gives them [the oppressed] a voice about racism in America. As CRT evolves, counter-storytelling emerges from revisionist history. Counter-storytelling, or naming one's reality, is designed to disrupt the narrative of the majority and present stories of racism and discriminatory practices from the perspectives

of people of color (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Howard & Reynolds, 2008; Khalifa et al., 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lopez, 2003). More importantly, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) assert, "Critical race theory recognized that the experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination" (p. 26). It is the hope that these African-American male principals' counter-stories will change mindsets, dismantle negative stereotypes, and disrupt social constructs about schooling for African-American boys and African-American principals.

Secondly, another tenet of CRT is the critique of liberalism. There are two notions that are embraced under critique of liberalism: colorblindness and neutrality. Colorblindness is the way to justify ignoring and dismantling practices that are designed to address inequities. Colorblindness and neutrality are exhibited in many educational practices. In fact, critical race theorists believe the notion of colorblindness only serves to racialize systems of oppression (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Khalifa et al., 2013). CRT applies insights into how these rules, norms, standards, practices, and assumptions that appear "neutral" systemically marginalize minorities.

For example, when one looks at the enrollment of students in the advanced placement (AP) or honor classes, very few to no African-American males are enrolled in those upper-level classes. This practice is exemplified in the book *Stuck in the Shallow End*, by Jane Margolis. Her research studied the disproportionately low enrollment of African-American and Latino students majoring in computer science. It discovered how

segregated classrooms and learning opportunities continue to be a systemic problem that affects students of color. Margolis (2011) states,

> The research shows how segregation and inequality along racial lines operate on a daily basis in our schools, despite our best intentions and the denials now codified into law by the Supreme Court. They operate through the disparities in learning opportunities, the disparities in teacher quality, and the interplay between assumptions, stereotypes, and structural inequalities, all of which combine to make a noxious stew that preselects only certain students to be given the opportunities to move ahead in the twenty-first century. It operates through cultural assumptions that make inequality and segregation in computer science (and many other arenas) seems normal and natural. (p. 16)

A social justice leader must have the acumen to recognize racism and inequitable schooling; these are the conscious or unconscious practices that create achievement and opportunity gaps for African-American male students. Furthermore, CRT provides another forum to examine educational disparities for African-American men (Palmer & Maramba, 2011). There must be a commitment for social justice as well a plan to ensure all students, including African-American males, have equal access to resources and opportunities.

Lastly, I will use critical race theory to interrogate the intersection of race and gender of the African-American male principals in my study and its impacts on educational norms and practices in rural school settings. Each of these men represents multiple identities and each individual role provides insight on their leadership development. As I explore their leadership practices and the support given to African-American boys, I will be cognizant of how their own personal or professional experiences as African-American men influence their view toward the educational system. Many

times, these principals are subject to the same racism, oppression, and stereotypes as their African-American male students (Riehl, 2000). Due to unwarranted stereotypes and negative perceptions of the Black principals' leadership capabilities, they must work even harder to dismantle views of them as ineffectual leaders. Jones (2002) states, "Due to stereotypes about leaders of color that followers may have about them, these leaders' credibility may be damaged" (p. 9). In most cases, Black leaders find themselves working harder to prove they are qualified for the job. Unfortunately, they must position themselves with the right credentials, or degrees, and have good test scores for upward mobility within the educational arena. Many African-American principals lose their aspirations due to continual cycle of low expectations by others. Jay (2009) boldly asserts,

> Indeed, despite being in a relatively supportive setting when it comes to addressing issues of racial inequity, the constant encounters with low expectations, presumption of failure, pigeonholing (and a host of other demons and microaggressions to which they are subjected) serve to deplete not only African-American educators' physical energy, but for some, their aspirations as well. (p. 680)

Summary

One-third of the students in the United States attend rural schools. Many times, these schools are plagued with limited resources, social isolation, and high rates of poverty. Consequently, these principals are faced with many obstacles to overcome. However, one relative strength of rurality is the connectedness of the community. These values are critical when establishing parent-school-community relationships.

The review of existing literature examined failures of African American males in America's school system. Teachers, educational leaders, and the media play critical roles in how Black males perceive themselves as students and as productive citizens in our society. The need to establish a strong cultural identity is essential to shaping the self-esteem of African-American males, allowing them the ability to navigate through oppressive and discriminatory practices. Parental support and advocacy help disrupt the achievement gap and provide the support African-American males need to be successful in school. Moreover, the role of school leaders, teachers, principals, and superintendents impacts academic success and achievement when high expectations become the culture within the learning environment for African-American males.

For African-American administrators, the principalship has special challenges and obstacles not faced by their White counterparts; consequently, the workload impacts on their physical and mental health. Critical race theory is designed to challenge the oppressive and discriminatory systems in America. The works of Derrick Bell are instrumental to understanding the impact of race in educational leadership practices. Critical race theorists point out experiences of racial minority groups are subordinate relative to the White racial experience. Critical race theory is offered as a critique to the data collected from the principals' interviews and their perceptions on the work done with African-American male students in rural schools. More so, CRT points out the systemic racism, oppression, and discriminatory practices that continue to plague the educational system.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the leadership practices of African-American male principals and their work to support African-American male students in rural schools in North Carolina. This chapter outlines the research design, setting, and sample examined in the study. It includes the data collection techniques and the data analysis employed. There is limited research on African-American male principals leading rural schools; therefore, the information can be beneficial as another way to address the opportunity gap and the challenges presented in rural schools and school districts—particularly for young men of color.

Research Design

In order to understand the work and relationships that African-American male principals have with their African-American male students in rural schools, a qualitative study design was employed. Merriam (2009) states, "All qualitative research is interpretive research" (p. 22), where individuals construct their reality from interactions with society and their world. Using face-to-face interviews as the data collection method, this technique allowed for a close examination of principals' work and the challenges African-American male school leaders face to educate a diverse student population, with a focus on African-American males in rural areas in North Carolina.

Lichtman (2013) states, “Qualitative research is to provide in-depth description and understanding of human experience. The purpose of qualitative research is to describe, understand, and interpret human phenomena, human interaction, or human discourse” (p. 17). Yin (2016) concludes there are five features of qualitative research:

1. Studying the meaning of people’s lives, in their real-world roles;
2. Representing the views and perspectives of the people in a study;
3. Explicitly attending to and accounting for real-world contextual conditions;
4. Contributing insights from existing or new concepts that may help to explain social behaviors and thinking; and
5. Acknowledging the potential relevance of multiple sources of evidence rather than relying on single source alone (p. 9).

Qualitative research focuses on the construction and interpretation of human experiences through real-life events, seeking a better understanding of the subject matter at hand (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). How do African-American principals construct their leadership practices from their past and current experiences? How do these experiences impact their African-American male students?

Merriam (2009) notes, “Research is about discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those studied and in hopes of making a difference in people’s lives” (p. 1). The participants in this study shared their “stories” with the purpose of illuminating schooling practices in rurality for African-American male students and principals. This study was designed to provide insight about African-American male principals’ interactions with African-American male students while the principals

interchangeably navigate the roles of principal and African-American men. The interpretive qualitative design interrogates ways these principals make sense of their experiences, construct their world, and attribute meaning to their experiences (Merriam, 2009). The participants presented first-person accounts of their endeavors as educational leaders and the impact of their leadership practices.

As stated by Denzin and Lincoln (2011), qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. Through in-depth descriptive interviews, the principals shared their perspectives and challenges as rural principals and their own personal paths to address school inequities concerning African-American males. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) argue, "Researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning" (p. 8). Having the principals share their experiences provided insight into their relationships and perspectives on educational practices and academic success for African-American males.

Understanding how the life experiences of African-American school leaders informed their leadership style and the approaches they used to address the opportunity gap for African-American male students at their schools will assist in providing strategies and support to African-American students in schools. This study closely examined how these men (the principals) interpreted their educational and formative years' experiences in K-12 and beyond, while considering the people and situations that made a difference in their success. During the interviews, there was much discussion about different strategies

deployed to close the learning gaps and several initiatives designed to increase African-American male achievement.

The study focused on eight (*n*=8) African-American male principals leading rural schools in North Carolina. The purposive sampling consisted of school administrators who were elementary, middle, or high school principals from various school districts with varying levels of administrative experience ranging from novice to veteran. They were selected based on three criteria: (a) African-American male, (b) currently or previously employed as a principal for at least 3 years in a rural setting, and (c) satisfactory school ratings of a C or above on North Carolina's accountability standards.

The snowball method was used to recruit the participants; I began by recruiting eligible African-American principals I knew personally. They in turn were asked for names of other African-American principals leading rural schools who they knew personally or professionally and who they thought would be good participants for this study. See Appendix A and Appendix B for oral recruitment script and recruitment letter, respectively.

To ensure the selection of only African-American principals leading rural schools, a list was requested and received from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction which contained the names, schools, and email addresses of all the African-American male principals within the state. Based on demographic data from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), there are 200 African-American male principals out of 2,468 principals in North Carolina. From that list, a determination was made of the schools led by African-American males which were classified and

located in rural areas. Using the United States Department of Education Statistics website (https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch), rural schools were identified. Each individual school was researched to determine if the school was classified as a rural distant, rural fringe, or rural remote school (see Table 2).

Table 2

Participant Profiles

Name*	School*	District*	Grade	Growth	Level	Rurality
Juaquan Hamm	Hender Middle	Dave	C	Exceeded	Middle	Fringe
John Cox	Hopewell Elementary	Monroe	C	Exceeded	Elementary	Remote
Ricky Blackmon	Linton High	Santee	C	Met	High	Distant
Kaden Jones	Hope High School	Dixie	C	Exceeded	High	Fringe
Jerry Staton	Woodrow Elementary	Richford	C	Met	Elementary	Distant
Thomas Clark	Manassas High	Mana	B	Exceeded	High	Distant
Amonte Bowen	Orlando High School	Orlando	C	Not Met	High	Fringe
Darail Wright	Kamden Middle School	Davion County	C	Not Met	Middle	Distant

Note. * pseudonyms

Participant Profiles

After identifying qualified schools and principals, prior to conducting interviews, site approvals were acquired from five school districts and superintendents. Each participant signed consent forms prior to the interviews granting permission to conduct the study (see Appendix C). Two copies of the consent form were made—one for the participant and a copy for the research record. Each participant, his school, and the district were assigned pseudonyms to protect the identities of individual schools, school leaders, and students. Each participant was assured the information obtained from the interviews and transcriptions would be confidential.

Along with the interviews, an examination of each school's End-of-Grade or End-of-Course data for the 2015-2016 school year was conducted to determine the academic performance of each school. Schools with a "C" rating or better on the North Carolina Accountability Standards were included in the study; therefore, this information was used as part of the selection of the principal and his school. In addition, principals were identified from each grade span—two elementary school principals, two middle school principals, and four high school principals. Below brief descriptions of each participating principal are provided.

John Cox

John Cox was the principal of Hopewell Elementary School located in the central part of North Carolina. He has worked 7 years as a principal and was inspired to go into education after his career in the military. He is married and has one daughter and was

influenced by his parents to be successful. He admits he is not a rule follower and always considers the students' best interests when making decisions.

The school demographics consist of 31% African-American, 52% White, 13% Hispanic, 3% Other, and 1% Asian. The school has 65% free and reduced lunch status. The school is classified as rural distant and is about 20 minutes from the closest town. For the 2015-2016 state accountability standards, his school is classified as a "C" school and his students exceeded student growth based on the NC EVAAS (Education Valued-Added Assessment System) data. Hopewell Elementary has a STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Music/Math) focus and each child has a computer to use throughout the school day. Hopewell Elementary has a rich tradition because it was one of the first schools in the community to serve African-American students. Mr. Cox is extremely proud about the school's history and its focus on STEAM.

Jerry Staton

Jerry Staton is the principal of Woodrow Elementary School in Richford County in North Carolina. He is a community leader and advocates for African-American males to ensure those students have the supports needed to be successful in school. He works with community stakeholders, parents, and church organizations to change negative perceptions about African-American boys. This is his third year as a principal. He has worked 7 years as an assistant principal. He has worked for 2 years at Woodrow Elementary and one year as the interim principal at another school. He felt that his years as an assistant principal prepared him for the challenges of being a principal.

The racial demographics of the school include 90% African-American, 5% White, and 5% Hispanic. The school has 85% free and reduced lunch status. The community is plagued with a high unemployment rate and many of the parents work in the neighboring towns in the factories and restaurants. The school is classified as a rural distant school. Based on the 2015-2016 school year, Woodrow Elementary is a "C" school and the students exceeded growth based on EVAAS data.

Jaquan Hamm

Jaquan Hamm was reared in a small, rural town in North Carolina. He has 14 years of administrative experience and is instrumental in closing the Black/White achievement gap at his schools. He was raised in a two-parent, military family. He found sports as an outlet and his competitive nature is exemplified in his leadership style—he is known to challenge his student body to work hard in efforts to outperform the rival schools on the End-of-Grade assessments within the district.

Jaquan was the assistant principal of Hender Middle School, one of the largest middle schools in Dave County in North Carolina. The school serves about 800-900 students and the demographics include 60% White, 30% African-American, and 10% Hispanic. The school is classified as rural fringe. He believed his work at this rural school shaped him as a leader. For the 2015-2016 school year, his school received a "C" grade on the state's accountability standards and based on NC EVAAS data his school exceeded student growth.

Mr. Hamm is not currently serving as a rural principal. However, he served as the assistant principal for a low-performing rural school. He was selected as a participant for

this study due to his exemplary work as principal at Red Middle School with closing achievement gaps for minority students and changing the school's culture. During his tenure as an assistant principal at the rural school, he and the principal changed the school's trajectory within one year. The next school year, he was named principal and was able to close achievement gaps for African-American male students. As a matter of fact, his African-American male students outperformed their Caucasians counterparts.

Ricky Blackmon

Mr. Blackmon is principal at Linton High School located in Santee School district. He was reared in a two-parent military family and traveled extensively around the world. With ten years of administrative experience, his leadership style focuses on empowering his teachers and students by setting high expectations. He views himself as a change agent.

His school is located in the rural part of the district and is classified as rural distant. It has a large service area, with bus rides sometimes taking two hours to and from school. The school demographics consist of 10% Hispanic, 30% African-American, and 57% White. The school has 65% free and reduced lunch status. For the 2016-2015 school year, Linton High's grade on the state's accountability standards is a "C" and the students met growth based on the NC EVAAS data. It is an impoverished school with limited resources and parental involvement.

Kaden Jones

Mr. Jones is principal at Hope High School located in the rural part of Dixie County in North Carolina. He was recently named Principal of Year for his county and is

highly esteemed throughout the region for his ability to turn around poor-performing schools. He is passionate about changing how African-American males are perceived by society. He was raised in the Northern part of the United States in an area where African-American men are expected to be imprisoned or killed. He was educated in a Catholic school by teachers who had high expectations for all of their students.

The school is surrounded by tracts of farm land. The student population consists of 30% Latino, 50% African-American, and 20% White. The school has 100% free and reduced lunch status. Based on the 2015-2016 school year, Hope High School is a "C" school and exceeded student growth on the EVAAS data. Mr. Jones believes the students at his school come from the similar backgrounds and the students share similar belief systems. The school is classified as rural fringe.

Thomas Clark

Mr. Clark is married with one child and was raised in a rural part of North Carolina. All of his teaching experiences were in rural schools. He grew up in a single-parent household and lived in poverty as a child. It was a college professor who saw his potential and encouraged him to major in elementary education. He credits his success to his mother, grandmother, and grandfather. He is the principal of Manassas High School located in North Carolina and the school is classified as rural distant.

His school has a heavy population of undocumented Hispanic students due to farming in the area. The student demographics consist of 50% Hispanic, 25% White, and 25% Black. The school has 75% free and reduced lunch status. The district receives a grant that provides free lunch for all the students in the district. The school system is the

largest employer in the county with many of the members in the community working in the system. According to the 2015-2016 school's accountability standards, Manassas is a "B" school and the students met growth based on NC EVAAS data.

Amonte Bowen

Amonte was raised in a two-family household and is from a large family. His has close family ties with both his immediate and extended families. He has four children and enjoys being a father. His rural upbringing has shaped his value system as a father and educator. He believes hard work pays off and education is key to changing your circumstances.

Mr. Bowen is the principal at one the largest, rural high schools in the county. He is the principal at Orlando High School in Orlando school district in North Carolina. He taught math and science and was inspired to go into school administration because he wanted to make a greater impact on the students he encountered. He was reared in a rural community and school district.

His school area is classified as rural fringe and the student population consists of 58% White, 36 % African-American, and 8% Asian and Latino. His free and reduced lunch status is 47%. Based on the 2015-2016 school year, Central High School is a "C" school and did not meet student growth based on NC EVAAS data.

Darail Wright

Mr. Wright works at Kamden Middle School and has been the principal there for 4 years. Prior to that he worked as the assistant principal at a local high school. He decided he wanted to major in Biology because he wanted to go into medicine; however,

he realized he did not like blood. He graduated from a predominantly White college and university with a degree in Psychology. He has a background in counseling, but decided he wanted to teach.

The demographics at Kamden Middle School are 45% Black, 45% White, and 10% Hispanic. The school has 100% free and reduced lunch status. Because of the large number of poor families in this community, the county receives a grant and every student has free breakfast and lunch. Based on 2015-2016 school year, Kamden Middle School is a "C" school and did not meet student growth based on NC EVAAS data.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred through interviews and each interview was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The interview questions correlated with the research questions (see Appendix F). The participants shared their stories and experiences as African American male principals in rural school districts. Each school's overall performance on North Carolina assessments determined whether the principal was appropriate to include in the study, along with the rural school classification. Each principal shared his perceptions and experiences in rural schools regarding his work as principal, especially with respect to his African-American male students.

The principals participated in two face-to-face interviews. Each interview was about 90 minutes long and was conducted at their schools unless they recommended another location free of distractions and interruptions. I ensured the participants were comfortable during the interviews by asking them general questions about their life and school at the commencement of each interview. To ensure confidentiality and privacy,

the principals and their schools were assigned pseudonyms. All data were kept in a locked file cabinet or on a password protected computer.

The semi-structured, open-ended interviews allowed for in-depth reflection on the participants' perceptions and experiences as educational leaders. The semi-structured approach provided the flexibility to ask probing questions help to clarify and refine the information and interpretation (Stake, 2010). For consistency in the data collection, all participants were asked the questions from the interview protocol (see Appendix D). Additional questions were asked as necessary to gain more clarity. The interview questions for both interviews were aligned with the research questions (see Appendix E). Subsequent to the interviews, I sent an email to the participants with a summary of the conversations along with a copy of the transcripts from their interviews. In addition to both interviews with each research participant, follow-up questions were posed in the email message. The participants were asked to read the email and the transcriptions and to respond to the email if there were inconsistencies with the conclusions or data analysis. All of the participants responded to their email and they agreed with the summaries and data analysis.

The purpose of the first interview was to focus on introductions and to create rapport (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009) between researcher and interviewee, and to discuss the participants' past experiences as young men. Rapport was established by asking the participants general questions about themselves and their school. Patton (1987) cautions that the interviewer's rapport should not interfere with neutrality concerning what the participant is saying. The principals were asked about educational experiences that

shaped them as educational leaders. During the second interview, the principals discussed their work as principals in rural schools and their relationship with the African-American males (see Appendix E for interview questions.)

From a critical race perspective, the participants utilized their "unique voice" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) as a way to communicate their experiences and perceptions as principals of color. Ladson-Billings (1995) argues,

> The 'voice' component of CRT provides a way to communicate the experience and realities of the oppressed, a first step in understanding the complexities of racism and beginning a process of judicial redress. For example, the voice of people of color is required for a deep understanding of the educational system (p. 14).

In addition, CRT provided a contextual lens on the continual disparity of academic achievement and engagement of African-American male students in rural schools.

Data Analysis

Each interview was read twice before coding in order to get a better understanding of the information gathered during the interviews. Line-by-line coding was performed to identify recurring themes and patterns (Merriam, 2009) and potential answers and commonalities began to emerge. During the initial coding process, I highlighted key words and phrases that addressed the research questions. Then these key words and phrases were written on the right side of the transcriptions for the coding of potential themes such as vocabulary, interventions, and guided reading.

Next, themes and patterns were organized into categories. For example, a chart was created listing the instructional strategies used at each school. I organized the

recurring or overlapping themes into a category in order to make meaning of the data. During the second phase of the coding process, I began to highlight potential quotes from the transcriptions that substantiated the categories. The transcriptions were loaded into Atlas-Ti (qualitative data analysis software) to assist with the management of the codes.

Positionality/Subjectivity

For many years, I worked as a special education teacher and later as an administrator in the public education setting in a small rural community. In these roles, I consistently witnessed the negative perceptions of educators toward African-American males. The impact of the inequities in the teaching and discipline practices for African-American males is a matter of grave concern for public education, African-American communities, and the outcomes of these individuals in our society. This study was conducted to determine, to some extent, the impact these biases and inequities have on their future endeavors.

As the parent of an African American male, I am well aware of my son's negative experiences with educators when students do not fit a certain mold. His personal and educational experiences forced me to think about the state of other African American males in our public schools. It is my belief that one of the key components for the success of African American males begins in the classroom and within the school walls. Their academic success comes to fruition by the positive perceptions and nurturing attitudes of educators and administrators. The expectations of teachers and principals play a significant role for any student, especially African-American males and socioeconomically disadvantaged students.

In addition to the experience as the parent of an African-American male, I also have significant experience both as a student and an educator in rural schools. Therefore, I understand the social constructs of rural schools and that outsiders are not welcomed. There is a sense of connectedness to the people within the community. As an African-American administrator in a rural community, upward mobility is a difficult process unless you have the right credentials and approval from the power players of that community.

Qualitative research is form of inquiry and the researcher must interpret what he or she feels, sees, and understands (Creswell, 2007). I am vigilant of my position and my past experiences; therefore, I paid close attention to my biases and belief systems by acknowledging the role of self. For example, I was conscious of my body language during the interviews and limited the number of head nods and affirmations because I did not want to interfere with the data collection process. However, I wanted the participants to know that I was listening and was actively engaged with their stories. Self-reflection or reflexibility is an asset in qualitative research (Lichtman, 2013), so I reflected on any assumptions or biases I perceived in myself in a researcher's journal. In addition, subjectivity was addressed by establishing trustworthy strategies, and by allowing the data to tell the story.

Trustworthiness

In this study, several strategies were deployed to establish trustworthiness. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. For the sake of time, the audio recordings were transcribed by an outside company. When establishing creditability in a

qualitative study, Creswell (2007) suggests, “In member checking, the approach, *writ large* in most qualitative studies, involves taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account” (p. 208). Principals were emailed the transcription and the data analysis as an opportunity to read the transcriptions and data analysis for accuracy and validity and provide feedback if he agreed or disagreed with the transcribed interviews and my conclusions. Each transcription was assigned a pseudonym to protect the privacy of the participant, the school, and the district. In some cases, participants were asked additional questions for clarification.

To further ensure creditability, the researcher used verbatim quotes from the interviews in the presentation of the data and results. Lichtman (2013) notes, “Credibility suggests that the results should be evaluated from the point of view of the participants” (p. 298). Using the words of participants, it enhanced the possibility for readers to see things from the participants’ point of view. The findings were thick in description using the actual words from the principals to describe their formative year experiences and their support practices for African-America male students. Many times, direct quotes were used to capture the respondents’ emotions. Patton (1987) states,

> Direct quotations are a basic source of raw data in qualitative evaluation. Direct quotations reveal the respondents’ levels of emotion, the way in which they organized the world, their thoughts about what is happening, their experiences, and their basic perceptions. (p. 11)

Lichtman (2013) refers to dependability as, “When the researcher must account for the ever-changing context within which research occurs” (p. 299). In this study,

changes that occurred were described immediately after the interviews in a journal. Specifically, documentation was maintained to determine how these changes affected the study. For example, prior the second interview, I documented how Mr. Clark met with a student's parents about a discipline issue. After that parent conference, he seemed distracted during the entire interview and he did not elaborate on the interview questions. During several of the interviews, there were interruptions from teachers, students, and custodial staff, so I decided to have the last round of interviews conducted at the central offices or in isolated locations within the schools. At the conclusion of each interview, the interview experience was immediately documented to ensure that there was no loss of experience or key details. Close attention was paid to their body language and voice quality. For example, Mr. Cox was uncomfortable being recorded; his answers were terse and each of his interviews was completed in about 20 minutes. However, when he gave me a tour of the school, he was comfortable talking and elaborating on his thoughts and stories about his leadership—this information was documented in my field notes.

Confirmability is the degree to which results can be confirmed or corroborated by others (Lichtman, 2013). To establish confirmability, audit trails were deployed and a professional colleague, with a terminal degree, served as a peer reviewer to examine the analysis and interpretation of data. Creswell (2007) notes that accountability can be achieved by ". . . audit trails consisted of chronological narrative into the field, interviews, group activities, transcription, initial coding efforts, analytic activities, and the evolution of the survival and coping theoretical model" (p. 291). The peer reviewer read all of the transcriptions and data analysis to determine if the summaries of the data

analysis were consistent with the interview data from the transcriptions. She agreed with my conclusions and gave me advice on how to construct the thematic analysis.

Qualitative research relies heavily on the interpretation by the researcher. Therefore, the data were triangulated to remove subjectivity and biases. In triangulation, the use of multiple and different sources of data provides another method of strengthening the credibility of a study (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 1990; Yin, 2016). This study utilized multiple interviews with multiple participants in an effort to establish triangulation of the data. In addition, the leadership practices and work from principals for all grade levels were examined—elementary, middle, and high schools.

Significance

There is limited literature examining the work on how African-American principals leading rural schools support African-American male students. The scholarly literature needs to reflect the relationships African-American principals have with African-American male students, creating a frame of reference that is positive and empowering for others to follow. In fact, scholars like Tillman (2003), Pollard (1997), and Warren (2016) feel that more research is needed on administrators' relationships with students and the impact relationships have on student achievement. This study provides insight specific to the ways in which African-American male principals directly or indirectly support African-American boys and young men in rural schools. The sharing of their stories and experiences may help counteract deficit thinking by educators who hold low expectations for students of color, particularly African-American male students.

The results of this study seek to inform educators, politicians, and community leaders to make potentially significant differences in educational practices and strategies for African-American males and ensure these students receive a quality education. More importantly, this study may influence the creation of policies to guarantee African-American males receive adequate resources and support during their educational journeys, K-12 and beyond. The ultimate goal is that this study will encourage school districts to engage in personnel practices that result in supporting and retaining African-American male principals, especially those principals who have a vision for social justice and equity, as one remedy to address the pervasive achievement gaps between African-American males and their White peers.

Limitations

The small sample size of this study may be a limitation although, due to the in-depth nature of data collection, qualitative research is characterized by small sample sizes. Additionally, there is a scarcity of African-American male principals leading rural schools. Most African-American principals lead urban or city schools.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings from principal interviews. I begin by providing a profile and overview of the eight, African-American male principals leading rural schools who were this study's research participants. The chapter will then move to a thematic analysis, with the themes being related to the research questions. In the thematic section, the perceptions and voices of the principals will more extensively be heard. I will present each principal's voice by telling their stories about the leadership practices used and supports utilized to strengthen the experience of African-American males. Critical race theory is used to analyze the influence race has on educational practices and decisions for African-American principals and African-American male students.

All eight principal participants lived in North Carolina and were rural school principals. The age range of the participants was from 40 to 56 years old. The interviews were conducted and analyzed from Fall 2016 through Fall 2017. Prior to the interviews, I obtained signed consent forms from each principal and site approval letters from each superintendent to gain access and permission to conduct research within the district. To protect confidentiality, each participant, his school, and the district were assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity. The findings in this chapter are used to answer the following research questions:

1. How do rural, African-American male principals support African-American male students at their schools?
2. How do African-American principals perceive their past experiences, including as students and educators, and how do these influence their current work with African-American male students?

Participants' Profiles and Voice

Jaquan Hamm—Hender Middle School

Mr. Hamm is a 40-year-old African-American male who is full of energy and has a passion for children. He wedded his middle school sweetheart and has been married for 12 years. He shared his story about being a teenage parent and how he worked hard not to be a statistic. Jaquan and his then teenage girlfriend got pregnant while in high school. Only to be a testament that hard work pays off. He eventually graduated from high school and college because he wanted a better life for his family. Now he is proud of his children and was even exultant about their recent accomplishments on their job. He has several siblings and is from a close-knit military family. Being reared in a two-parent household, his dad was influential in his upbringing, and his mother ran a rigid, military-style home.

Jaquan has been the principal of two different schools in his district. He was selected to participate in this study because of his work with closing the achievement gap at each of his schools. I wanted him to share his best practices and strategies used to reach the at-risk population. He has been a principal for 10 years and worked 5 years as an assistant principal at both middle and high school levels. He believes the time he spent as an assistant principal in a rural school setting has shaped him to be a better

administrator. His success with closing the Black/White achievement gap and with creating a positive culture at all of his schools has made him well-known throughout his district.

Mr. Hamm has a baccalaureate degree and a master's degree from a predominantly White university (PWI) in the southern region of North Carolina. He confessed he was enlightened by social inequalities in education when he went off to college. In college, some of his African-American friends would share stories of their schooling in all or predominantly African-American schools and described how they were helped to feel empowered by all the adults in the building. Until that moment, he had not realized the harshness of the teachers and administrators at the high school he attended toward African-American males, internalizing that behavior as the norm.

During the first interview with Mr. Hamm, we met at his school on a Saturday morning prior to him attending a school-sponsored event. He seemed eager to share his story of his trials and tribulations as a principal, as well as his achievements. Mr. Hamm felt his K-12 experiences were positive. He attributes his love for playing sports as one of his motivators for his success in school. He admitted there were perks for being an athlete and later found that his non-athletic African-American male friends were treated differently, and sometimes harshly by teachers at his high school. After college graduation, he continued to play sports at the professional level.

He went overseas to play professional sports and later returned home to volunteer at his high school as an assistant coach. The head coach and some members of the community noticed his potential to lead students to excellence and encouraged Jaquan to

become an educator. He began his teaching career at a high school as a lateral entry teacher while he continued coaching. His impact with students became evident, so the principal encouraged him to go into school administration.

The superintendent in his district asked Jaquan to transfer to a rural middle school to assist the new principal. Mr. Hamm stated, “It was a hard transition to Hender Middle School because the teachers were not ready for change.” He and the new administration had to work hard to gain buy-in from the teachers to make changes in instructional practices and schoolwide behavioral management. He recalled,

> The principal that was there before had been there for like 10 years. He’d been there for a while and there were a lot of norms there. People were used to the way things were, and we come in, a brand, new administration. I mean, totally new. All three administrators were brand new when we got there . . . To take over a school with 800 to 900 kids. We were trying to deploy some of the county’s mandates which really made it hard. It was change . . . and to go to a school that was not use to change. And we are new, we really had to work at gaining buy-in from the teachers. If you don’t have buy-in from teachers, you can’t do anything.

For the first time in recent history the school made academic gains, improving student achievement and increasing end-of-grade (EOG) scores.

Our attempt to complete the second interview during school hours was unfruitful because of the numerous interruptions, so we agreed to reschedule the interview for another time at the central office. The interview was free of distractions and interruptions. During the interview, Mr. Hamm was confident; however, he seemed a little more exhausted from the day’s work as he had been on that Saturday morning. As we begin the interview, it was apparent Mr. Hamm is passionate about his work as a principal and was

candid about some of the challenges he and the administrative team faced as leaders at Hender Middle School.

Mr. Hamm felt this rural school was unique, which brought about its own set of challenges. As the administrative team, they had to combat student self-doubt, low confidence, student and teacher apathy, habitual absenteeism, generational poverty, and the students' inability to understand the relevance of learning. He opined as a challenge,

> . . . overcoming the self-doubt, overcoming the confidence barrier. If you are always told you're going to do this, you're not going to graduate, you're not going to do that, and if you're told that enough times, especially as a child, you're going to eventually begin to believe it and that creates lethargy in the children. It creates them not wanting to turn in assignments.

Student apathy was a major issue because the students had a hard time identifying the purpose of learning. In many cases, it was viewed socially unacceptable by families and community members because it was their goal for students to one day work at the family garage or farm. He stated he had many battles with the families because he had high expectations for the students and gave the students hope about the possibility of graduating from high school or attending college.

Then Mr. Hamm shared his experiences as a principal and his struggles he encountered to bring equity for minority and poor students. Mr. Hamm stated,

> I do not believe in leveling. I tried leveling, early in my career for 3 straight years. I am really results-oriented but looking at the end of grade (EOG) data . . . when the kids were leveled, they stayed leveled. I am talking right across the board. The high class made the high [scores], the mid, and the low [students] got worse because you had nobody to pull from.

So, Mr. Hamm worked with his teachers to change their mindsets about homogenously grouping of students—many of the teachers were accustomed to having segregated classes; however, Mr. Hamm desired to give all students exposure to more rigorous work.

When he was specifically asked about what discourages African-American males from the learning process, he stated they are targeted:

> They don't get a break when they make mistakes as their counterparts do, and you can see that in the legal system today. They're made the example out of. They are the ones to get the stiffest consequence, and it leaves them with a "no matter what I do, they're not going to let me be" attitude.

He believes that this behavior stifles their motivation.

Mr. Hamm deployed several strategies or practices to increase the academic outcomes for African-American males at this school. For example, he ensured teachers provide remediation for struggling students, and created a schoolwide intervention block schedule to address the learning needs of students failing in a subject area or on previous end-of-grade assessments. As principal, he deployed the Club Program, which he attributes to narrowing academic gaps at all of his past and current schools. This program allows students to participate in club activities on the condition that each student must have passing grades in all subjects.

His vision for African-American males is that they overcome social stigmas, negative stereotypes, and bad influences from peers. It is his belief that in order to overcome those barriers African-American males need to understand their history and culture. Also, African-American males need a good support network or social structure to push and instill in them that they can do it.

Kaden Jones—Hope High School

Mr. Jones is a 45-year-old African-American male who was reared in a two-parent household. He is family-oriented and is passionate about helping others get better. He went into education after his career in the military. He taught high school social studies and worked at a middle school as a math teacher. As a reservist, he worked on his master's degree in school administration and was accepted in the Principal's Fellows program and recently received his terminal degree. He has been a principal for seven and a half years and he was an assistant principal for 6 years.

His mother, a teacher by profession, influenced his calling to teach. He said, "I'm very passionate about education I see the importance of it in our society, and to better people personally. And that's kind of what drives me professionally." The movies *Lean on Me* and *The Principal* motivated him to go into school administration because he wanted to have a bigger impact on a school than in his individual classroom.

One of the greatest challenges he faced as the principal of Hope High School was to change the culture of low expectations. Many of the teachers believed the students were limited in their ability to perform academically because of poverty. He reminisced about his first year as principal at Hope High School as being trial by fire. He recalled,

> I never seen poverty like I saw there. I thought that I understood it just 10 minutes up the road in another part of the district. The poverty was eye opening. You know you've got poverty, you've got poor instruction. It was okay not to succeed there. It was ingrained that these kids can't. We can't ask them but so much because they can't. You know, they can't do this, they can't do that.

According to Mr. Jones, many of the teachers felt they were doing the kids a favor because the teachers were their only hope. The culture of low expectations was evident in every aspect of the building. He stated,

> Some of the teachers kind of had an attitude, they didn't come out and say it, but they kinda had an attitude they were doing the kids a favor by being there. Even though they may or may not have been effective at what they were doing. Nobody wants to drive all the way out in the middle of the country to work with these kids. You know, it was okay to come in late as long as they came because nobody else would come. These are the type of prevailing ideas that a lot of the teachers had. But if you asked them in a survey, everything is great and nothing needed to change. When I got there, I realized that everything wasn't great and there was a lot that needed to change.

Many of the students did not have adequate housing and they moved from house to house. He stated, "Parents were from job to job, or to no job. They're not eating consistently when they leave school, school is where they eat. And when they're [the students] out of school then they don't eat." He discussed about how impoverished the community was, and how as principal he had to fight the public's negative perception about the school and the students.

During the second interview, he discussed the strategies and research-based practices that turned his school around from initially an F school to a C school. Prior to his tenure, many of the teachers were still using overhead projectors, transparencies, and chalkboards. At this point, he realized the school's need for a culture change in order to prepare the students for 21st century learning by equipping each class with document cameras and whiteboards. More importantly, he knew he needed to provide ongoing

professional development to teachers and support staff on research-based practices to improve achievement for all students at his school.

His vision for African-American males was that they are prepared for enlistment, enrollment, or employment. He has a personal philosophy about social justice—he believed it means fixing the gaps. He felt that many African-American males come from environments where education is not important. Thus, Mr. Jones worked to be more responsive to the needs of his African-American male students. He quoted, "I think I'm much more willing to, not more willing to, more responsive, I would say. I am more responsive to the different needs." He gave several examples of practices he implemented to be more responsive to the needs of African-American male students. He was willing to change students' schedules, reassign teachers, and offer year-long courses. He shared,

> With that comes being more willing to if a schedule is not working out, change the schedule. If a student's schedule is not working out, try to find a new teacher that will make it work. You know, I even encourage some of my African-American boys. We had a new agriculture teacher I hired. I moved the other Agriculture teacher, and he finally left. The program was not going to be friendly toward students of color, and it wasn't growing, and we have a school that's predominately students of color. So, I got a new teacher, White female, with a very interesting background, but she was really good with our kids, all of them. So, we started encouraging our male students to take agriculture, and it wasn't a class that most Black kids, male or female, take. This teacher was turning it [student enrollment] around.

He added,

> . . . being willing to make a mid-semester, mid-year change to a schedule, reassign a teacher that you know are more effective with certain things, but a lot of principals at high school, I've worked won't do that. Once the schedules are in place they live with it and the consequences of it too. If you know kids are not ready, if you have a year-long math class, and you know kids are not ready to go

> on to Math I, Black males or otherwise. Why set them up for failure and make them take the class just to please your schedule. Change the schedule, let them take something else, let them repeat the class the next year. It is a philosophy—some people think they just need to go ahead and take it. But, if you can double dose them, even, put them in an intro part which a lot of the boys don't like, but either let them repeat the intro part in the spring, or you put them back in the intro next semester, or you do something to kind of help them build their skillset, so they're more successful. But a lot of people just not willing to do that. They're just not willing to be responsive and to change anything. Some of them have the mentality of I'm not gonna treat these kids any differently than I treat everybody else. I just see [the] kid, I don't see color.

Kaden is passionate about his work as an instructional leader—it is his belief that African-American males need adequate instruction, culturally responsive teaching, and great teacher. It is his expectation that teachers plan and incorporate culturally-relevant practices in their lesson plans. He stated, "working with teachers through the lesson planning and the literacy pieces, [they] incorporate things that are culturally responsive that kids of different backgrounds would respond to, but also kids of any background." Also, he believed educators who receive their graduate and ungraduated degrees from different universities are more well-rounded and prepared to teach and lead, so he hired teachers from various colleges and universities in and out of state.

Thomas Clark—Mana High School

Mr. Clark has been a principal for 3 years and worked 3 years as an assistant principal. He is married and has one child. His daughter is the joy of his life and he wants to make her proud. He was reared in a single-parent household in a rural community. His grandfather, grandmother, and mother were influential in his life, and they provided a solid foundation in his upbringing. He has demonstrated resilience by overcoming some

childhood challenges. He talked freely about his past and issues with his father. He stated,

> I consider myself to be extremely authentic in a sense. What you see is what you get. I grew up in a rural background. I came from a background where I guess you can say the odds were stacked against me and the statistics were in place for you not to be successful; they were present. We were poor. For a lot of my upbringing, it was a single parent household with my mom, and my sister. My daddy is addicted to drugs and still is to this day. The whole time I grew up it was so. With that being said, I had every excuse and reason to not be here.

He was a star athlete in high school and received an athletic scholarship to play sports at the collegiate level. Due to a sport injury, he transferred to another college where he met a professor, who inspired him to major in elementary education. He quoted,

> As an athlete, everything was laid out for me. I was told what to do. I got to [college], I was completely lost. It was a chance encounter with a lady name Sally Harry who was walking across the yard and dropped her things. I was sitting there and then I helped her pick them up and carried them to her office. She asked me what my major was and what I wanted to be in life. And I told her I enjoyed helping people and she said, "You should think about being a teacher." I said, "Okay, I like high school." She said, "If you really want a challenge go to elementary school." And she created a class schedule and I majored in elementary education.

This professor told him he could make the greatest impact as a teacher and administrator at the elementary level. As an educator, Thomas has only worked in rural school districts. He went into school administration because he wanted to make a greater impact on more students than the 20 to 25 students in his class.

He reminisced about his experience with racism as a first-year elementary teacher:

> My very first year, I had a principal at the time, a white lady who hired me. . . . It was a group of parents who once they found out who I was did not want their kids to be in my class. It was under the guise of I do not want [my] AG child having a first-year teacher. She [principal] came to me and made sure I knew it did not have anything to do with that [being a first-year teacher] and she wanted me to know and understand what was happening. I respected her so much for this because it would have been easy to write it off. It is a lot of parents who do not want their kids to have new teachers that happens every day, but she knew the community well enough and the parents well enough to know that was not the reason. That was the excuse they were going to go with publicly, but she challenged them to give it a shot and me a shot.

Mr. Clark and the principal had a meeting with the parents, requesting the parents give him two weeks. The principal requested that the parents allow the students to decide on what they think of Mr. Clark as a teacher. Mr. Clark stated, "How much pressure is that at any level? [To] make a long story short, not one of those kids end up leaving my class."

The first interview gave Thomas an opportunity to discuss the school district and the history of the community. The school is located in a rural farming community and is miles away from the nearest town. He highlighted,

> It is a rural farm community. I would say it is half Black and White. It, also, has a pretty, heavy Hispanic population due to farming. A lot of my kids' parents work on various farms in the area. I have a large what I consider to be a large percentage of undocumented Hispanic students that attend school here. The community is very supportive of the school system. They respect the job that we do. Generally, they have our backs when we call, and I feel that is the same for the other schools in the district. The school system has a reputation of doing right by kids. And by it being such a small rural community, people don't just move here to Mana County.

Mr. Clark stated the people love the school system because it is the same district they came through as students, and the district is the biggest employer in the community.

Thus, he added, ". . . If you don't work for the school district or the school system, odds are you know someone personally who does."

During the second interview, two ladies walked into his office without a scheduled appointment to discuss a discipline issue about a student. After the meeting with the parents, Mr. Clark seemed distracted from our interview. He later stated he had to make some decisions about long-term suspending the student for inappropriate behaviors. He gave me a tour of the school; it was evident the teachers had the students engaged in the learning. When we walked into the study hall classroom, all of the students were working on their laptops, or helping each other with classwork.

From his perspective, his school is the perfect learning environment because he believes the teachers do not have to convince the students that education is a good thing. The parents are confident the administrator and teachers are taking care of the students. Therefore, the parents have a vested interest in the school and their community. Mr. Clark believes the school receives support from the community, which is a major benefit for working in a rural school. Nonetheless, there are some challenges with leading a rural school—poor community, limited resources, and limited to no exposure of students to the world beyond their county. Therefore, it is of upmost importance that these students are exposed to the outside world.

His vision for African-American males is that they see their own potential and they have access to equal opportunity by giving them what they need to be successful. African-American males can learn from authentic tasks and project-based learning. Mr. Clark depicted that there are certain conditions that must be present to promote academic

success for African-American males. They must have accountability, compassion, and strong teachers who care about people.

Mr. Clark's interactions with African-American male students include the following: greeting them daily and staying informed about their personal lives. He believes this is one way of making personal connections with the students and he encourages his teachers to do the same. He strongly believes it is critical to be involved in the students' lives outside of academics and they must know he cares about them. The effective strategies and practices are getting the family involved, taking the village approach, and the use of data to pair students with the right teacher.

However, he clarified, "You hold high expectations for all students." In turn, he had the same level of excellence from his teachers. He monitored the teachers' instructional practices by classroom walk throughs because he expected each student to be engaged in rigorous instruction. Mr. Clark purported,

> . . . You know it is one thing for teachers to say, I expect all my kids to score a level four or five, but every time you walk in their classes, there is a worksheet or some basic level activity going on. Show me that you have high expectations by challenging these kids to get out front and deliver a three to five-minute speech, based on certain criteria or the things they are going have to do to be successful. Put them in groups with people that you know are above where they are and below where they are and see how they are able to come together by working and pulling everybody's strengths together to create a product.

Moreover, poverty impacts the academic achievement for his students and all the students within the district. He opined that one of the challenges of rurality is being poor and candidly discussed the impact poverty has on the district. He replied, "Often times people in rural school are more giving of their time and not so much monetary because

they do not have it." Many of the families in this county are living below the poverty line, so he further shared the issues that are intertwined with poverty.

> . . . And all of the challenges that come along with poverty. You have kids who get the best meal, no different than any other school, but we have kids who get their best meal from here at school. You know this is their safe place and where they want to be. They have certain family responsibilities because of poverty when they leave, they may not be able to do homework because they may have real housework to do . . .

He continued, "We are not immune from those challenges. And when you are in a small town like this you see it and you understand it a lot more."

John Cox—Hopewell Elementary School

Mr. Cox is a 56-year-old African-American male who lives in the same town as his school. When I was searching for elementary schools led by African-American male principals from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's list, I searched for a school with at least a "C" rating on the state accountability standards that met or exceeded student growth on the NC EVAAS data. After an extensive search, his school was selected for the study. So, we made contact via phone and he seemed eager to participate in the study.

When I arrived at his school for the first interview, I searched for the buzzer to announce my arrival. To my surprise, I opened the unlocked door. As I entered the front office, I asked for Mr. Cox and he yelled from his office to inform me he was working on a discipline issue, and he would be with me shortly. He had his assistant principal escort me to another office, while he talked with the male students about an issue during class.

During the first few minutes of the visit, it was apparent that Mr. Cox is proud of the school's rich history and he shared the story of how the land was purchased by a local owner and donated to the school system. He also informed me that he and his mother attended this school as students. As a student, his parents were influential with his success. Mr. Cox shared his story about his early life with his family as sharecroppers. He recalled, "They [parents] were sharecroppers when I grew up. We were on welfare until my mom got a job after she went to school. We were sharecroppers until I graduated."

He graduated in 1979 and joined the military. He stayed in the military for 9 years and got a job working in a mental health hospital. Later, he worked as a teacher assistant in a self-contained behavioral classroom. He went back to college and received certification to teach in special education with a baccalaureate of science in liberal studies. I asked him if his parents pushed for him to attend college. He shared,

> No, my parents didn't push college. My sister went to college first since she is a nurse. Then we laugh about it because I said then I'm going to go to school and be a teacher. And you know, she works part-time and still make more than I do and I'm in administration.

After the second interview, he gave me a tour of the school. Once we entered the gym, he informed me that it was the original gym and is a historical site for the county. As we walked around the old building, it was obvious the students were engaged in the learning. Each child had her or his own computer to complete class assignments and Mr. Cox was pleased about the deployment of the STEAM initiative at his school.

Jerry Staton—Woodrow Elementary School

Mr. Staton is the principal at Woodrow Elementary School in Richford County. His school is located in an agrarian community and is about 15 minutes from the closest town. He is a product of the same community where he is serving as principal. Due to school choice, many students left Woodrow Elementary to attend charter schools in the area, thereby making the student population predominantly African-American. The school has a strong history and has been in the community for many years.

Jerry was reared in a two-parent household and has a large family. His father was influential in his success and inspired him to be a better man and leader. When he discussed his dad, he became emotional because his father had such an impact on his life. The last thing his father told him was, "Boy, continue what you are doing." He talked fervently about his experiences growing up with his father and family.

His father sent all of his siblings and children to college, while he had no formal education. Jerry attended a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) in North Carolina. He is a National Board-certified teacher and taught social studies for 4 years. He enjoyed teaching in his hometown because he wanted to make a difference in his own community.

Both interviews were conducted during the school day at his school. As I walked into his office, the whiteboard on his wall displayed the school's trend data for 3 consecutive years. Based on his prediction of the data, Woodrow Elementary should be a "B" school for the 2016-2017 school year. As a principal, he stated his decisions are data-driven and he often has data discussions with teachers.

He stressed his belief in a democracy and the importance of getting buy-in from all stakeholders, especially teachers. He quoted, "I put teachers first and if the teachers are happy, in turn, the students will be happy." He expressed his belief:

> As far as my leadership style, I believe in teacher empowerment. I have a lot of good teachers for the past 3 years. They have been stifled, but they're good. So, I believe in identifying their positives and empowering them to just push further. I believe in being a team player. As far as my leadership style, I believe in a democracy! I really do. I know the final decision stops with me, but as far as getting input from everybody else. I believe in getting input because if I don't have teacher buy-in it's not gonna be successful.
>
> Well before coming to [Woodrow] the culture was they [the teachers] could not talk in the hallway. The teachers could not talk in the hallway! As I said, they were really stifled. They would get an email from the past principal if they were talking in the hallway…. They were really in silos. Everybody is kind of isolated to themselves. So, when I came aboard that was one of my main goals to change the culture of the school.

Mr. Staton's vision for his school is to build positive relationship with teachers in efforts to ensure they are empowered to their job. It is his belief that if his teachers are happy then the students are happy and successful.

Teachers must have high expectations—their perception is vital to students' success. He added,

> Being in a rural area like this you really have to think outside the box. You cannot expect the parents to come out here 12 miles from [the town]. You have to do [things] that is different to get them more involved. A lot of our students are academically behind when they are coming to us, so we have to really make up that ground. In the beginning, some of my teachers felt like, 'Oh they [the students] are coming to us like that'. Okay, they are coming to us like that, we realize that. What are we doing to do to fix [the gaps]? We just cannot hold on to it and say, 'It's the parent's fault, it's the parent's fault.' We know what we are dealing with, they are sending us the best that they have, so let us go ahead and counter that and do what we have to do.

He believes that teachers' negative perception for African-American students can negatively impact their achievement and felt comfortable addressing teachers with deficit-thinking attitudes. He shared,

> The perception is that Black males don't perform well at all. You do have some educators, some teachers, that feel that way. . . . I actually had to have a conversation with a teacher about her expectations for the kids, the class in general, but mainly [because] of the males in the classroom too.

When posed the question, "What promotes academic outcomes for African-American boys?" he replied teachers must make the connection with them through dance and music. The combination of patterns and rhythm helps these males retain information. He pointed out that this group of male students benefits from working in small groups, by tapping into their competitive nature, and by incorporating vocabulary into classroom instruction.

Ricky Blackmon—Linton High School

Ricky Blackmon is the principal at Linton High School and has been a principal for 4 years. He is married with two children. He was reared in a large military family and his family traveled a great deal around the country. He has five siblings and enjoys family gatherings. His father, a hardworking man, was influential in his life because he set a great example of a good provider for his family; he would go without and even walk miles to work to support the family. Ricky talked a great deal about his heritage—his parents came to America as immigrants. His childhood has made him resilient and competitive. He views himself as a change agent.

Ricky majored in journalism and went into teaching through the lateral entry program, where his first teaching job was in an urban school setting in North Carolina. Drawing from his previous teaching experiences in the urban setting, Mr. Blackmon believes rural students are overall well-behaved. At Linton High School, the school community has strong Christian faith and values. Many of the teachers are from the area, making it is easier to establish personal connections with the students. Blackmon recalled,

> . . . it is a very faith-based culture, community as far as our stakeholder our parents are concerned—very rooted in Christian beliefs. The culture of the school is one that is very family oriented from our faculty into the students. A lot of the students know the teachers here. The teachers went to school here and they know the area. There comes that family feel just because they know this area very well. With that being said, we also have teachers who are willing to [be] stretched [to] come out of their comfort zone to get kids to want to come to school. So far as culture, we are now [a] culture since I [have] been here [that] is [about] how can I excite kids about being in the building. We have done a number of things like implementing PBIS, to academic celebrations, to just things that applaud kids from being great students in the building. So, I would say the culture is high energy that really focuses on what I am doing right versus what I am doing wrong.

He credited himself for making connections with African-American males through "sports, music, latest fashion, and by the common language."

Mr. Blackmon shared several challenges he faced as principal at his school. He had to deal with teacher and student apathy; as a result, both students and teachers internalize low expectations as the norm. This was his second year at Linton High School and during this time, he had to deal with blatant racism from teachers. The intersection of his age, gender, and race played an imperative role in the teachers' acceptance of him as a

principal. His ability and competence were questioned because they felt he was not old enough to be a principal. He internalized this misconception, therefore, he believed he had to work harder to prove himself as a competent leader to teachers and parents.

Mr. Blackmon has had crucial conversations with this administrative team and staff about setting high expectations for minority students and the importance of being culturally responsive. For example, he encourages his teachers to challenge African-American males in upper-level classes. He explains,

> We're trying to show is that give them [African-American males] an opportunity to see what they can do. And if they're struggling, don't just say 'take them out the class'. We've tried that his year in particular. And they [teachers] say you know, "he's not gonna make it. You know he's struggling to bad. As the teacher, this is where your expertise comes in. How are you gonna support him because taking him out is not the answer?

He even added,

> We just had a conversation last week with my administrative team about culturally responsive teaching. We talked about how is it that we can get our staff to understand the other cultures that exist in this building, in particular is the African-American culture.

He is cognizant of the academic needs for all his students, particularly his African-American male subgroup. Therefore, he has integrated literacy, set high expectations, implemented clubs, and focused on lesson planning throughout his school. His counselors, assistant principals, and Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) team support the efforts to reach African-American male students especially when it comes to attendance issues. In addition, he used the following strategies to improve achievement

for African-American male students: flex periods, smaller settings, schedule changes, and one-on-one assistance during instruction. He offered yearlong classes and he is responsive and willing to make schedule changes to meet the individual needs of his students.

Amonte Bowen—Orlando High School

Mr. Bowen is married with several children and is retired from the military. He has a large family and his parents made a significant impact on his life. He was raised in a two-parent home and attended a small school in a rural area of North Carolina. His parents instilled in him early that failure is not an option, and never permitted him to underperform in school. During his secondary school years, Mr. Bowen developed tight-knit friendships and he and his friends pushed each other to perform academically and ensured no one failed. More importantly, he felt the administrators in his primary and secondary years cared about their students. He attended a predominantly White university in North Carolina.

Amonte Bowen has been a principal for 11 years. He views himself as a private person and somewhat standoffish to others. He was a math and science teacher at a middle school where he began working in leadership roles within his grade level and department. Then he decided to enroll in the Masters of School Administration (MSA) program and has administrative experiences at the middle and high school levels.

As an African-American leader, Amonte has experienced racism from parents at his school and he talked about the hurt he has endured when people try to discredit his ability and reputation as a principal. He gave vivid examples of the racism from parents

and school leaders. For example, he discussed there are times when White principals with similar or less experience are incentivized more than Black principals, therefore making the pay scale unfair.

Mr. Bowen stated that the media's stereotypes of Black men are negative, and this behavior is evident when he meets with parents at the beginning of the school year—they are unsure what to expect from him based on their preconceived notions of Black men. He stated,

> . . . At freshmen orientation in about a week and a half, I'll stand in front of folks in the cafeteria who are already scared. I'll stand up there as a Black male and the room will be filled with a mixed crowd, but mostly White people. There are folks who still, their experience with Black people is what they see on television.

His work as a classroom teacher influenced his work as a principal; subsequently, that experience kept him grounded when relating with teachers about making decisions for the school. He voiced his personal philosophy on some of the factors that promoted success for African-American males—they need a higher level of accountability and more structure in the home and classroom settings. Also, African-American male students need clear expectations. He stated, "Where in some situations you gonna find that teacher and sometimes, the school administration—they are culprits." They just pass African-American students through the system because teachers lower the standards, and perpetuate the belief that African-American males cannot perform well.

His vision for African-American is to have better discipline practices, hoping they can see their worth and recruiting and placing more African-American teachers in core classes. Mr. Bowen incorporated several instructional practices to promote African-

American male student engagement in the learning process to include Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) strategies which focus on notetaking and study skills. The teachers also incorporate scaffolding strategies during instruction and provide afterschool tutoring for students.

Mr. Bowen stated it is tough to build a rapport with African-American male students because they are mostly from homes where they listen and respond to the female voice; when responding to male authority figures those interactions are not always positive. Therefore, educators must establish trust prior to working with these young men. His support for African-American males consists of presenting a positive image, leading by example, modeling, upholding certain standards, and having highly qualified teachers in the building.

Mr. Bowen deployed the following strategy or practice to help African-American male students who are struggling: Advisor/Advisee during homeroom. He stated, “Some students need a reliable and consistent adult in the building, especially for African-American students,” so each student is assigned a homeroom teacher and keeps the same teacher the entire 4 years of high school. This teacher will help the student with career and college planning, behavioral/emotional support, and student/teacher counseling on graduation requirements.

Family-School partnerships are established through school-related activities and by his colleagues from the feeder middle schools. He felt fortunate that the middle school principals know many of the community stakeholders and providers—his principal colleagues help support him with building and establishing relationships with those

stakeholders. His personal philosophy is that he is understanding of the actions of rural people. They are hardworking people and willing to assist the school with whatever means they have.

Darail Wright—Kamden Middle School

Mr. Wright is an African-American principal working at a small rural school. He works at Kamden Middle School and has been the principal there for 4 years. Prior to that he worked as the assistant principal at a local high school. He decided he wanted to major in Biology because he wanted to go into medicine; however, he realized he did not like blood. He graduated from a predominantly White institution with a degree in Biology. He has a background in counseling, but decided he wanted to teach. He was encouraged to go into school administration by an older principal who compared him to Joe Clark. This principal allowed him to work in an administrative capacity as a teacher; this experience afforded him the opportunity to gain the knowledge and skills to lead adults and influence students.

Mr. Wright works hard to establish relationships with his students, parents, and community members. He views himself as straightforward, blunt, and honest with people. The school's culture is rich in pride and admits the community becomes upset when outsiders come in and try to change the status quo. He stated,

> As an outsider coming in, I could tell you they're very skeptical of outside people coming in because I guess for so long people have come in and they [principals] served their few years and they're out. When I first started in the community, the people [felt] like, 'He's not gonna stay here long.' . . . Everybody wants to feel very valued and important. They take a lot of offense to people coming in and not being able to get on their level. They don't want you to have an attitude like you're looking at them like they're beneath you.

Mr. Wright enjoys the calmness of working in rural schools. He believes rural politics are a challenge and are influenced by community values and belief systems.

As an African-American principal, he feels that stakeholders question his ability and decisions as a leader which creates frustration. However, he is confident about his rapport with all of his students. Indeed, many of the kids relate to him because he plays rap music and they appreciate his style of dress:

> I make sure I dress real nice, and they [African-American males] just love it. They love to hear me playing my rap music when I pull up in the morning or when I would be in class or in my office playing some music.

More important, they listen to him and respect his advice because "I think with my young, Black males, I show them more of a human, personal side when I see them . . . I grab them and just hug them. His vision for African-American males is that they will not be a statistic.

During the second interview, we met at his school. He discussed strategies and practices he implements to help African-American males at his school. He is well-aware when African-American males are overwhelmed, they shut down. He believes African-American male students are successful when they work in groups, and have differentiated instruction, and are exposed to culturally relevant materials.

He shared a powerful story about his experiences as an assistant principal where he used his intuition to put the safety of a kid first. He stated, "We had a kid at the school where I had a hunch that he was getting abused." He recalled,

> He [the student] was going through some stuff at home, and he wouldn't tell anybody and one day, I saw a bruise on his arm. I told him to lift up, lift up your shirt and he had bruises, Black, all on his back and his dad came and tried to pick him up. He [the student] was like, "My daddy been beaten' me." And I knew it. His dad was kind of like the neighborhood drug dealer.

When the student's dad arrived at school, he became confrontational and threatened to kill Mr. Wright, but he refused to let the child leave with his dad. He called the sheriff and the department of social services, and the student was taken from the home. Consequently, the principal of the school was upset and felt threatened by Mr. Wright's executive decision to contact the authorities in an effort to prevent a student from physical abuse by his parent.

> . . . But my principal got mad with me. And I'm thinking okay situations like that you should be thankful and for some reason, she was mad. She was upset. Like I guess, she wanted to be the one to make that call. She wasn't there, and I wasn't gonna let him go home. She kind of looked at it as bringing what is the word I want to use a spotlight onto her. They kind of said she should've picked up on it. Honestly, she should've, cause the kid stayed in trouble all the time. He was always in her office. But we always knew something was wrong.

Consequently, the student was beaten so badly that his insides were permanently damaged. Mr. Wright felt that his intuition or gut feeling per se probably saved that young man's life. He concluded that leaders must have the acumen to pick up on cues when working with students.

Darail is confident that having good relationships with African-American male students is key to building academic success for those students. He ensures his teachers are kind and compassionate to students. He exclaimed, "They treat them fair because they

know that's what I expect. And I tell them that in the meetings. You are not going to mistreat [African-American kids]."

He feels what makes him different than other principals is that he goes above and beyond. Even former students will visit the school during the summer and weekends to assist him with school beautification projects and other small jobs in his building—just another testament of his ability to build rapport with the current and previous students from the rural community. These kinds of acts spread throughout the community and help establish those powerful relationships necessary to support his vision for his school.

Thematic Analysis

Research Question 1: How Do Rural, African-American Male Principals Support African-American Male Students at Their Schools?

Theme 1: The Importance of Establishing and Encouraging Positive Relationships

One of the common themes the principals discussed when working with African-American males was the importance of relationships. Relationship building is a two-fold effect; when relationships are established, they (a) promote positive student outcome, and (b) build psychological health and the ability to cope with stress (Johnson & Johnson, 1991). On the contrary, when they are not established, it can discourage African-American males from the learning process. Linton's (2011) research points out that positive relationships are one of the four characteristics that create equity-minded schools.

Relationships are critical to academic performance in school; they are crucial in the success and failure of African-American male students. Mr. Clark responded during

the interviews in similar words: “And that always comes back to relationship. It starts with that relationship and if you don’t have that, you can’t do anything with any student, especially African-American male students.”

Furthermore, Mr. Staton recalled,

> With the African-American male, you have to have a relationship with them. For example, I had a student that’s in fourth grade. He likes to dance. So, we were talking about his test and I said, “Well if you do well on your test, I’d dab for you.” So, and just the fact that I understood what dabbing was and you know that’s what they were all doing at one point. The little dance moves. But, just the fact that I understood what dabbing was.

He was able to establish a rapport with this student because he made himself available; more importantly, he could relate with the student through dance and music. When Mr. Staton shared his beliefs about African-American males, he stressed, “You have to have a relationship overall with the kids. With students in general, but especially African-American males. You really have to have a relationship with them.” Mr. Cox shared the same sentiment. He stated, “But most importantly, just having a relationship with them overall, is gonna help them academically.” He elaborated, “You have to do all of this before you can even hit the academic piece. They [African-American males] have to be able to have a relationship. Trust you. Show that you care. Then, they’ll do their work.”

Mr. Blackmon learned this lesson the hard way and soon realized how crucial it is to develop relationships with African-American students. On his first day as a lateral entry teacher, he entered the classroom unprepared to meet his students’ needs. He soon

realized he must establish a relationship with them and earn their respect first before any learning can happen. He shared his experience as a first-time lateral entry teacher:

> My first year teaching I came in as lateral entry and I apply for a job in the inner-city school where the turnover was astronomical. I interviewed for the job and the principal literally asked me why would I want that job. I was working as a journalist and wanted to know why I wanted to leave. [The principal stated], "I cannot not offer you the job because I am setting you up for failure. I think you are too polish for the kind of kids in this building. We have kids who fight teachers. Yup, we have kids who sell drugs. We have kids who are parts of gangs and do not respect authority." She said, "You are young and just too polish. They will not listen to you, but I thank you for coming in." . . . She couldn't find anyone about 2 weeks before school started. She called me and literally said, ". . . you seem to be adamant about wanting to go into teaching, the job is there if you want it." . . . I got there, and she was right. Day one those kids were off the chain.
>
> . . . So that experience to me working at the [inner city school] shaped me because that experience you know I learned about me. I didn't realize I couldn't connect with kids who weren't like me. No, I didn't grow up in inner-city poverty, but I was poor. There is a difference with inner-city poverty than just you don't have the money to make ends meet. The mentality is completely different. And so, I was able that year to build relationships with kids by taking kids home, feeding kids, just a different kind of level that let me know early on that I have to build relationships with kids. I have to look beyond learning grammar, beyond learning how to write, and beyond learning how to read. If you don't build relationships with students, you will fail miserably at everything you do in education.

From that lesson, Mr. Blackmon worked hard as principal to establish a rapport with his African-American male students inside and outside of school. In addition, he encouraged his staff to do the same.

Mr. Clark, principal at Mana High School, responded, "It takes special people to work with poor, African-American, male students." At his school, there is a culture that values every teacher or adult having a personal rapport with a student. He opined, "And

by us being so small, we know that every one of our kids and I would be confident in saying has a personal relationship with one of the adults on this staff."

Mr. Clark worked hard to establish relationships with African-American male students through his day-to-day interactions. He stated,

> One of the things I always try to do is greet everyone positively when I see them. You know, I try to ask questions that they'll be on a surface-level. It holds me accountable to get to know the kids and what's going on. To be able to ask, "How's your mom?" or "Is your brother back home yet?" to get to know a kid. I have a kid whose brother is deployed and that is a big deal. I know he's supposed to be coming home.

Mr. Clark gave an example of some his interactions with African-American male students.

> "How's your grade in Mrs. Hoop's class?" or "Make sure you let me see that video you're making for English when you are finish." You know, just staying on top of what's going on with them and being involved in their lives as much as possible outside of simply academics. 'Cause, you know, the kids know when you care about them. And if you don't care, they shut down and they turn you off and once you lose them . . . Once you lose a kid, I think it's almost impossible to get them back.

Mr. Cox, the principal at Hopewell Elementary, stressed that in order to reach African-American males in the school setting and before any instruction can occur a rapport must be established by the educator. He noted,

> Most of the time, you have to work on building a rapport before you can get them [African-American male students] to open up enough to even do anything for you. They will just do enough to get by but build a rapport with them and they will do anything you ask.

Mr. Clark truly believes that "teaching life lessons are not in the curriculum; it through their personal experiences." Jackson et al. (2014) examined,

> The insights from this study's participants remind all who work with Black and Latino males that educating them transcends standards and curricula; their education requires positive relationships and an ethos of care through which they can connect. While educators, researchers, and policymakers continue to seek solutions to complex education dilemmas involving Black and Latino males, participants in this study remind us that one solution is to re-center the roles reciprocal love and care play in creating optimal learning spaces. (p. 412)

Mr. Jones shared a similar experience about his willingness and desire to change his school's trajectory. His first year as principal at Hope High School, he realized he had to make a positive impact at a historically low-performing school**.** He found it even more challenging when all the feeder middle schools were low-performing as well. Therefore, he knew he had to establish a rapport with students and teachers in an effort to influence change. For example, he talked about one of his encounters with two African-American male students:

> So, the relationship piece that is something I really had to work on. I'll never forget, I was in my office my first year, and these two boys were going off about something, and they had some significant problems, a lot which were not school related. They were being disciplined and there was me and there was a Black school resource officer, and I want to say there was somebody White in the room, but I can't remember. But the boys were going off, and you know I was trying to talk with them, they wouldn't listen and one of the things the boys said they were talking about my clothes, the suit that I had on. The young man stated, "Don't act like you don't act like you weren't just like us 'cause you used to be just like us where you were our age." They were just doing this whole routine. "You come from the same place that we can from, don't act like you weren't just like us." And then my response to them was, "Not really because I never behaved this way in front of people, much less in front of my principal or my teachers," but I got what they were saying.

Even as professional men, these African-American principals are faced with the notion of Acting White (Fordham, 2008; Harper, 2006; Ogbu, 2004) when trying to establish and maintain relationships with minority students and their families. In fact, Mr. Hamm is referred to as the uppity Black guy because he disciplined African-American boys and their parents felt the suspensions were not justified. Similar, Mr. Jones is ridiculed by several African-American boys for using proper English. To change these marginal relationships with African-American boys, the principals felt obligated to go above and beyond the call of duty to demonstrate and prove they can be trusted by simply showing these young men that they are genuine people. The saying 'actions speak louder than words' is a true sentiment when working with African-American males.

Relationship-building through mentoring and home visits. All of the principals felt that relationships were critical to the success of African-American males. There were several approaches each principal used to enhance relationships with African-American male students and their parents. They were established through formal or informal mentoring and by making home visits to the students' homes. Mentoring provides African-American male students access to a caring adult at school (Marzano, 2003; Parrett & Budge, 2012), supports academic achievement (Noguera, 2003), and improves student self-esteem (Jensen, 2009). The principals themselves were mentored by coaches, teachers, and others, which helped support their success.

According to Marzano (2003), mentoring is a direct approach to enhancing crystallized intelligence. Crystallized intelligence is the knowledge learned about the world, which is one of the strongest determiners of academic achievement (p. 136). Teens

who have long-term relationships with a mentor have better outcomes at school and work (Jensen, 2009). Mentoring improves self-esteem and is a deterrent to negative social norms.

During the interview with Mr. Hamm, he discussed how his fraternity supported and mentored a group of African-American male students in an effort to teach them real-world life experiences, in hopes of deterring inappropriate behaviors in school. Also, this mentoring program was created to provide support to the at-risk students at his school in hopes of leading those students down a more positive path toward academic success. Additionally, Mr. Clark stated,

> We also have a mentoring program here. It is for all students, but you know, we focus on our students that are at risk. The largest demographic in our at-risk population is African-American. This program is where teachers meet with the kid at least once a week.

Similarly, Mr. Jones, a high school principal, quoted,

> We had a partnership with the community college. There was a mentoring program that came out and worked with our boys. I am not sure how they were selected, I think it might have been teacher recommendation. They [African-American males] were counseled on job readiness skills, and just general skills of being a successful student.

Sorrentino's (2006) study revealed at-risk university students who participated in the mentoring program along with tutoring consequently reported higher Grade Point Average (GPA) prior to them beginning the program. The program is attributed with lowering dismissal rates and it helped students meet their academic goals. The mentoring

program was “the differential factor that helped students improve their academic performance and avoid academic dismissal” (Kelly & Dixon, 2014, p. 504).

Second, many of the participants made home visits to establish and encourage relationships with students and parents. All the principals stated that their school communities were plagued by poverty. In many places it is generational and rural poverty. Many rural parents do not have a reliable means of transportation, thereby making it difficult to participate in parent conferences and school-related activities. In an effort to support parents and attempt to build relational trust with them and students, several of the principals made home visits to inform parents of issues with attendance, grades, and discipline. One of the principals said he assists the families with their basic needs by taking food to the home or paying a monthly electric bill to avoid disconnection. Another principal, Mr. Cox, noted that he has an open-door policy for both the students and parents. He stated,

> I reach out to parents, and I have done home visits. I’ve taken kids home when they do not feel good and parents cannot get here [school] because they have no way to come and get them. I’ve taken them home, so that builds relationships up with the parents, as well as the child. They will think he cares about me because he is willing to do this for me. I do a lot of talking to them [African-American males]. That is a big part, just talking with them like they are somebody.

He is committed to helping African-American males succeed.

Home visits are just another way to build trust with the students and family with the notion that these principals were willing to go above and beyond to advocate and support the student. According the research by Parrett and Budge (2012), many high-performing/high poverty schools encourage some form of home visits; consequently,

these actions improved student achievement, increased student attendance, and reduced discipline referrals. Mr. Blackmon states, “I’m out there going door to door sometimes just trying to make that connection with getting the kids to know how important school is.” For Mr. Blackmon, it is the connection with the students that makes a difference.

Theme 2: The Importance of Academic Supports

As instructional leaders, most of the principals built strong teaching and learning systems within the school for all students—particularly the at-risk students. In most cases, the at-risk population is the African-American male subgroup. Principals must be knowledgeable of effective practices in curriculum and instruction to provide guidance to teachers to meet the students’ academic needs (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). African-American males, more so than any other subgroup, need academic support to be successful in school.

Literacy as the foundation. Most of the principals believe the focus on literacy is important to the success for African-American males. Struggling readers require reading practice, have to make connections with what they are reading, and must have experiences with a wide range of genres (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Darling-Hammond (2010) quotes,

> An estimated 30 to 40% of children enter kindergarten without social or emotional skills and language experiences needed to be initially successful in school. Studies have found that the size of the working vocabulary of 4-year-old children from low-income families is approximately one-third that of children from middle-income families, which makes it much more difficult for them to read with comprehension or to engage in academic learning relying on that vocabulary, even when they can decode text. By first grade, only half as many first graders from poor families are proficient at understanding words in context and engaging in basic mathematics as first graders from non-poor families. (p. 33)

Many of principals felt that effective literacy will promote academic success for African-American males, Mr. Jones stated,

> . . . a focus on literacy is very important in the schools to kind of promote their success, academic success. A lot of our kids don't come to school with the necessary word, and background knowledge that they need for academic success.

Also, he concluded,

> . . . Literacy needs to be the focus, and we get hung up on a lot of social programs and things like that, but a lot of times the social aspect will be taken care of if we can get our kids learning the way that they need to learn, and experience.

As a result, his teachers are given professional development on instructional strategies to improve reading for students in poverty by district staff. Also, they are implementing learning focused-lesson plans that address and focus on vocabulary and writing.

Furthermore, Mr. Cox stated that at his elementary school they focused more on reading. The research suggests language development begins at an early age, thereby making literacy in elementary school critical to academic future for African-American males (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). On a day-to-day basis, his students received instruction from a research-based reading program. Additionally, principals Mr. Cox and Mr. Wright echoed that African-American males reading materials in which they are interested will make a difference in their achievement.

Mr. Hamm talked about how poverty affects the amount of literacy and vocabulary rural students are exposed to prior to kindergarten. Parrett and Budge (2012)

suggest, “Children who live in poverty often come to school behind their more affluent peers in terms of literacy and language development” (p. 119). Mr. Hamm opined,

> People love to blame teachers for the percentage points that they’re at academically, in regard to the end-of-grade [assessments] (EOGs), and they don’t look at the why. Everybody looks at the how, the what, and when in the schools, but you don’t look at the why and being out there, being an administrator out there, you see because you’re in the fight. You’re right with them. High socioeconomic classes tend to have supports, as far as nannies, preschool, daycare and that they have literacy thrown at them. They are read to. They have a story read to them every night. They have. When they’re in their pre-school, they’re going over the alphabet at age two and three. So, they’re getting that foundational knowledge that the non-affluent peers get until kindergarten. They’re kind of coming to you two years advanced.

Parrett and Budge (2012) added,

> Poverty often places constraints on the family’s ability to provide other material resources for their children as well. For example, they may have limited access to high-quality day care, limited access to before- or after-school care, and limited physical space in their homes to create private or quiet environments conducive to study. They may not own a computer or have the fiscal resources necessary to complete out-of-school projects. (p. 119)

Mr. Wright, principal at Kamden Middle School, explained that the African-American male students at his school do well with fluency, but they struggle with reading comprehension. He monitors his teachers’ lesson plans to ensure reading comprehension is addressed during instruction. He found it more effectively for his African-American students to have reading materials or assignments to which they can relate, so they can see the benefit or long-term need.

From a critical race perspective, the lack of reading and literacy skills increases the chances that African-American males will not be afforded the opportunity to make a

profitable living or have the earning potential for upward mobility in America. Furthermore, Eppley and Shannon (2016) revealed,

> Learning to read is understood as the accumulation of capital that individuals can exchange later in order to earn a living. As capital, reading is fetishized and becomes an object of competition measured early and often through abstract tested means. Because accumulation is the goal, reading education takes on the characteristics of the "world in which we are living" in which individuals (and social groups of which they are members) work to gain advantages. Our current array of reading achievement gaps attests to the consequences of past unjust decisions, policies, and activities within this frame. (p. 70)

Intervention to close gaps. Each of the schools offered remediation and intervention to help close achievement gaps. Intervention is designed to provide extra assistance in a subject matter to meet the student's individual learning needs and gaps. Many of the principals are outside-the-box thinkers trying to implement effective interventions to meet academic needs for all students and increase their schools' overall assessment results. For example, Mr. Blackmon recalled, "One thing we really try to institute is at this school is a flex period, which helps those students who are struggling, and your African-American males in particular, get more one on one assistance in that class by that teacher."

Mr. Hamm and Mr. Jones tapped into the competitive nature of African-American males by implementing the Club Program at their schools. Both principals were able to change the trajectory of low-performing schools and close achievement gaps using this practice. Furthermore, Mr. Hamm credits the Club Program as the reason why he is so successful at his schools. This program works under the premise that each student must maintain a certain grade in each class to participate in club activities. Students with

failing grades must attend intervention to increase his or her grade. Most of the African-American males chose to participate in basketball. The competitiveness of the sport makes those boys strive to keep up their grades, so they can participate in the sporting event. Consequently, they do not want to disappoint their peers on the team because they have failing grades, taking a chance of losing to the opponent.

Both principals (Mr. Hamm and Mr. Blackmon) work closely with their schools' Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) team to ensure at-risk students are identified early prior to failure or to dropping out of school. Table 3 illustrates the instructional supports and strategies these principals deploy at their schools to close achievement gaps for African-American male students in rural settings.

All of the principals discussed instructional strategies and supports utilized at the school level to support and assist African-American males in the school setting. From CRT perspective, Ladson-Billings (1998) suggests, "Current instructional strategies presume that African-American students are deficient. As a consequence, classroom teachers are engaged in a never-ending quest for 'the right strategy or technique' to deal with at-risk African-American students" (p. 19). In other words, these principals are somewhat contributing to deficit-thinking by reinforcing the belief that African-American males are the problem versus examining the systemic systems that contribute to the achievement and opportunity gaps.

Table 3

Compilation of Instructional Support and Strategies

Principal	Grade Level	Instructional Supports and Strategies
Mr. Cox	Elementary	Literacy groups (programs); ability leveling; immediate feedback; after school tutoring; interventions; STEM focus
Mr. Staton	Elementary	Vocabulary; rap music; small group instruction; after school tutorial; PBIS
Mr. Hamm	Middle	Literacy focus; Club Program; remediation; intervention; credit recovery; enrichment; heterogeneous grouping
Mr. Wright	Middle	Guided reading; one-on-one instruction; differentiation; Plan Do Study Act (PDSA); cultural relevant materials; ability grouping
Mr. Blackmon	High	Small group instruction; chunking of information; nonlinguistic representations; hands-on; rap music; more science labs; flex periods; one-on-one assistance; interventions (MTSS); offer year-long classes
Mr. Bowen	High	AVID strategies; scaffolding; notetaking strategies; tutorials; interventions
Mr. Clark	High	Technology use; authentic task; project-based learning; pair students with successful teachers; interventions
Mr. Jones	High	Literacy plans (vocabulary strategies and lesson planning to include literary); graphic organizers; AVID strategies; tutorial program; quality teachers; accelerated curriculum; co-teaching; Club Program; PBIS; offer year-long classes

Theme 3: The Importance of Cognizant (DeMatthews et al., 2017) and Caring Disciplinary Practices

Throughout the interviews, the participants recognized the inconsistent coding of disciplinary referrals and overall unfair treatment toward African-American males by teachers. In general, this leads to a high number of suspensions, an increased number of high school dropouts, and contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline (STPP) (Gonsoulin et al., 2012; Osher et al., 2012). The overrepresentation of minority students, particularly African-American males, in the exclusionary discipline practices of suspension and expulsion is not a new finding and is a pressing social justice issue (Fenning & Rose, 2007). Many disciplinary policies and programs, for example "zero tolerance" and school SROs (School Resource Officers), designed to promote safe and orderly schools, have paradoxically created a disproportionate number of suspensions and expulsions for African-American males (Gonsoulin et al., 2012; Gregory et al., 2010). As a result, many African-American principals witness these unfair practices and ultimately find themselves protecting those students who lose hope in the educational system.

Many times, the principals in this study had to encourage, advocate, and support African-American male students by speaking to students individually in order to redirect their behavior, providing professional development to teachers about how to create culturally responsive environments, and creating a network of teachers and support staff who can assist African-American male students to successfully navigate through school. Tillman (2004) found that Black principal leaders exhibited various forms of caring: exposing students to good teachers and good teaching, being sympathetic and empathetic, being compassionate, and seeing children who were often held hostage to inequitable

systems and institutional racism as human beings. These Black principals were master leaders, gap-closers, innovators, translators, and transformers.

Overall, the principals attempted to implement alternative methods of disciplining, such as engaging in discourse with students, to prevent suspension. Mr. Blackmon felt:

> . . . Unfortunately, when they [African-American males] happen to get into trouble, they have to come see an administrator, and they have to come and see me. We sit down and have those conversations. We talk about the issues that they got into trouble for. And then that sometimes branches into a conversation about what might be the root cause of why they responded that way.

He even added,

> . . . I would have those conversations with the kids during lunchtime, or between halls or when they come up to the office. And when they got in trouble they were kind of disappointed because they didn't want to disappoint me. A lot of times it deterred bad behavior because they had that relationship with me.

Mr. Staton claimed that schoolwide he has few discipline problems because he uses the whole child approach addressing the issue with the child. He also involves his support staff with issues relating to discipline. He stated,

> I really don't do a lot of suspension. You know, I try to figure out what's really going on. Especially if it's out of the norm for a student. If I know this student is typically a pretty good student every day. I try to figure out, okay what happened? What happened at home? Did daddy promise he was gonna pick you up on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. He didn't come at all. . . . I really take a whole child approach to disciplining my kids.

Furthermore, he uses the whole team approach. His social worker, counselors, and even the data manager assist with disciplinary matters. This is coupled with the implementation of schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). As the principal, he has been successful with having low suspension numbers for a predominantly African-American student population. The research study by DeMatthews et al. (2017) suggested,

> Principals who believed discipline required an individualized and case-by-case approach were identified as flexible and cognizant disciplinarians. These principals considered the particular circumstance, policy, and antecedents; however, they also considered the potential harm and/or benefits inherent in their disciplinary decision making. They recognized misconduct as a result of intersecting variables associated with the school, various aspects of the lived experience of the student, and conflicting or inconsistent messaging from the students' home and community. As a result of understanding these facets, these principals viewed discipline more as a teaching tool than as a rigid practice to ensure order, protect instructional time, or punish students for misconduct. These principals maintained proactive systems to develop and sustain the types of positive behaviors that would allow students to flourish and develop their own problem-solving skills. (p. 534)

At some point in these principals' educational careers they have experienced some form of racism as a teacher and/or principal. Their personal or professional interactions have made them more sensitive or cognizant of unfair treatment toward minority students. Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a framework to highlight the subjective disciplinary practices against African-American boys, questioning the hidden and institutional racism these young men encounter in school (DeMatthews et al., 2017). Thus, these experiences influence how principals engage in student discipline practices, especially for African-American males. Mr. Jones discusses candidly about his

experiences at another school that shaped him and his decisions with discipline at his rural school.

Mr. Jones added,

> As far as discipline goes, I worked in a predominantly, White schools where I saw the same policies applied differently to the children for whatever reason. I wouldn't say that there was always necessarily overt racism, but it was kind of institutional. You had a predominantly White school—behaviors might look different, but the intentions are the same. Some of the behaviors are very much the same, and just handled differently. You know if you are dealing drugs, if you are bringing weapons, if you are causing fighting, and you are fighting in school. There are some things that should be handled the same way as if you were in the hood. But, that wasn't always the case.

When Mr. Cox was asked how he treats African-American males at his school differently, he drew upon his experiences as a Black man in America and the racism he faced in the military.

> I don't think I treat them differently. When I was in middle school we had to deal with more discipline than we do in elementary school, but I still treat them the same. The colleagues I worked with at the time, they treated them [African-American males] fair, but everyone doesn't treat them fair. It's that hidden racism in there, you don't see it, but you know it is there. They will pick a child out and just focus on that child.

Ricky Blackmon, the principal at Linton High School, states his school has few discipline issues; however, the majority of infractions are committed by African-American students. He feels it is an Office of Civil Rights (OCR) issue. He quoted,

> . . . 30% is Black, but the 30% make up the majority of the discipline referrals. And one of the reasons they're getting written up for, it is primarily disrespect. So, we had a conversation with staff, about what's considered disrespect, and what is it considered.

> Staff, in this building, has viewed disrespect from minority students as just simply talking back. That isn't disrespect. You probably shouldn't talk back, but it isn't disrespect to a degree that they would say they've been disrespected to you. You talk to many of those kids who got disciplined or got a referral from their teacher and they say, "I didn't disrespect her, I just told her what, you know, I just told her my point of the story!" And in their [African-American students] mind, that wasn't disrespect. To them it was just, telling you what they did. So, we actually had to have a conversation at the staff meeting about, what is considered disrespect for the minority students, and the White students.

As a result, Mr. Jones shared he is more sensitive and understanding when dealing with discipline issues. He concluded,

> So, I am always a little bit more sensitive when issuing discipline consequences to all of my kids, 'cause I am in a high students of color school. I don't like to use the term minority. I am in a high population with students of color, not to say that we did not issue consequences, but I was a little bit more understanding and more willing to talk through problems with kids. But things like disrespect, you know what is disrespect, and how does it look across different demographics, because sometimes what people perceive as disrespectful is just the way that the kid communicates, because that's how they communicate. They are not being disrespectful.
>
> . . . We are not being consistent on how we code things, we're not being consistent in how we take things, personally or whatever from the kids, in particular, our boys [African-American] because a lot of people see them as a threat. You know they bow up and start doing a whole bunch of body movements and people are going to see that as threatening. My favorite is always disorderly conduct. The teachers will code things as disorderly conduct, but when you read the write up, and when you find out what really happened. I mean it's not anything other than just may disrespect, or insubordination or something else small. When you say disorderly conduct that's a big statement. It makes it sound like somebody's completely out of control where that may not be the case. So, I try to get people to understand those sorts of things.

As the instructional leader, Mr. Clark believes students should not miss instructional time for infractions such as disrespect.

> Sometimes what may be disrespect to you may not be disrespectful to me from where I come from. I did a training at the school I came from not making passes or excuses but the worst thing I do is rolling my eyes at you or not asking you or looking in your face if it is the worse I did today. Is it really not worth me being in your class for 90 minutes for the next couple of days?

Mr. Hamm became known as a disciplinarian by school and district leaders in Dave County. Therefore, he was asked by the superintendent to go to Hender Middle School, located in the rural part of the district, because it is historically low-performing. He stated,

> I was asked by the superintendent to leave my current school and to go to Yukon Middle School to support a new principal that was going there. The principal was moving up from elementary and was going into a middle school. And I had middle school experience and was known as the disciplinarian. The superintendent stated, "I need you to go and support this principal, make sure the kids stay in line, and we will reciprocate in a couple of years, 'cause I know you want a school."

Many times, African-American administrators play a significant role in disciplining African-American children, sometimes they are hired and retained by district leaders to serve this population of students.

Mr. Hamm confesses he understands the plight of African-American boys and does not stand in judgment. He believes their non-verbal behavior is misunderstood by teachers—not every behavior is a threat or disrespectful. Davis (2003) states, "They [African-American males] feel they are often misunderstood and wrongly judged because on how they look and act" (p. 531). Over the years, Mr. Hamm has gained a different perspective about his role as an African-American principal and his role as a disciplinarian. He recalled,

> . . . that is with my interacting with them [African-American males] in the hallway or when I'm doing some discipline and all. But at the same time, I am an African-American male in the school system, as principal, and I could be judged by my counterparts, as letting them [African-American males] get away with this or not holding to the same standard as I do other people. So, you gotta kind of walk that tightrope, trying not for me to be judged and then they come after you for that.

As principal, he admits he could not gain buy-in from his teachers regarding writing unjust, disciplinary referrals. He stresses that it was difficult for him to stop teachers from writing those types of referrals, especially infractions for disrespect, because he did not want to be perceived as promoting his own race.

Theme 4: The Importance of Community Support for African-American Male Students in Rural Schools

Another recurring theme is that the principals felt the community was supportive to the school. In context for this study, the principals are referencing the community as local businesses, churches, and parents. Much literature reflects that parent/community relationships impact student achievement for African-American male students. Focusing on the work Tillman (2008), African-American leaders must create community partnerships to support African-American boys' success in school. Tillman (2008) noted,

> Dr. Hilliard also believed that African American educators must be committed to helping African American students and should partner with communities and parents to help them succeed in supporting these students' academic and social development, even when schools failed to do so. (p. 597)

In general, rural schools are the hub of the community and they serve multi-generational families stricken by poverty (Budge, 2006; Duncan, 1999; Howley & Howley, 2010). Although rural families and communities are faced with economic

distress, they have a great deal of pride in their school and its culture. Rural leaders must be conscious of the social, historical, and cultural practices of these communities and principals who are considered "outsiders" must work to establish relational trust among teachers, parents, and community members. Ashton and Duncan (2012) assert, "Rural leaders need to gain knowledge, trust, and credibility within a tight-knit rural setting" (p. 23). On the contrary, Mette, Biddle, MacKenzie and Harris-Smedberg (2016) revealed,

> Although rural areas are often idealized in the media and popular imagination as tight-knit, racially and socioeconomically homogeneous communities, such depictions often mask patterns of social exclusion within small communities, particularly with regard to poor individuals and families. (p. 71)

As African-American principals lead rural schools, they must show that they have the best interest of students at heart and are committed to the rural community while simultaneously combating institutionalized and oppressive practices often shaped by values of the community.

The participants in this study established external networks to support African-American males, while trying to create relationships and trust within the community. For example, Mr. Jones recruited graduate interns from the local community college and university to provide counseling services for his minority students. Also, Mr. Staton and Mr. Hamm worked closely with their fraternities to provide mentoring for the African-American males at their schools. Mr. Wright established rapport with his former students and during the summer they would come to the school and help him clean the school and beautify the grounds.

At Hender Middle School, the community is prideful and has an appreciation level and excitement for little successes. The community takes pride in their traditions, even when faced with institutional and generational poverty. Mr. Hamm experienced many battles with parents because of his race and being an outsider to the community, so there were many battles with parents his first year. He shared the mentality of the people for the community.

> . . . the great grand mamas were there, the grand mamas were there, their mamas were there and the children pretty much carry on the tradition. It's a farming community, you know during great grand mama's time, you had all those children, so you could work the land. I mean, that's just how you did and then you're very prideful because it is your land. You own it. So, it is up to you to produce from it, and they bring that to school. Don't want to harp on the negative, but I can say one of the negative things that I experienced out there was the expectation of some [parents]. The students were only required to go to a seventh or eighth grade level, or ninth grade. And then it was understood that once you turn 16, you would either leave and go work in papa's garage.

Mr. Jones felt there were benefits for working in rural schools. He stated,

> For the most part the children are very well-behaved. [They] are respectful children. The parents, once you get them on your side, once they've realized that you're helping, and you're trying to help their children. They can be some of your most, biggest supporters because often times they don't come from much either, and they may not have had a very positive experience in school.

On the contrary, he felt that the students in rural schools encounter many challenges.

> . . . It takes some convincing more so than others to get them [the parents] to see the bigger picture of what you're trying to do to help their kid, but not to say that you don't have that in urban schools, or suburban schools, but there's a different set of politics that kind of work in those schools. In rural schools, you often have a lot of the kids cut from the same cloth, they come from similar backgrounds, even if they may look different racially and ethnically. Economically, they

> probably come from pretty much from the same type of background. Rural schools—those populations have remained kind of stable I guess you would say. Meaning that their parents went to school, and their grandparents went to school there. The teachers have taught multiple generations that the attendance lines don't change because there's been no development.

Having the capability to develop and maintain relationships with community members is vital to the tenure of rural principals because the parents and community members desire to have locals as principals. All of the principals except for two of them were not from the same community; therefore, establishing relationships among parents and the community was crucial to their tenure as principals. Mr. Bowen shared,

> . . . when I was deciding to come down here or not, it's a little intimidating now because folks expect high school principals to be from there, that community . . . and becoming a high school principal here, is different. But, um, once, once people know that you're all about kids, and you really do care about their children, and, and you're going to hold their children to a standard. . . . So, I would say the community here's really supportive, really involved, and I'm talking about everyone now. I'm not, not just talking about the certain side of, of the town. These folks are involved in what goes on with their child.

Mr. Cox stated he has a supportive community. Whenever he needs something for the school or his teachers, local businesses and/or churches ensure he has what he needs, and in most cases, he ends up with more than he needs. At one point, the county wanted to close the school due to funding, and the community arrived at the local board meeting, standing room only, protesting the proposal thereby suggesting rural people and the community stick together. Mr. Cox stated a large percentage of the staff is home grown. They were actually students at the same school.

Both Mr. Blackmon and Mr. Clark believe that one of the benefits of working in a rural school is the support from the community. However, their support must be earned through trust and the commitment to the community. During Ricky Blackmon's rites of passage to a new community as an outsider, he worked on his relationships with the students and parents. He stated,

> As far as the community is concerned it is people who really care about their kids. I know we struggle with parent participation, but when it comes down to their sons or daughters being done right! These parents are going to show up, and they are going to show up adamantly about you explaining yourself if they [the students] are not done right. And they will also come up to you to applaud you for doing the right thing by your kid, for holding their kid to the fire if you will. So, we have a community that really embraces discipline, they embrace strong morals, integrity, character. They really want to be a part of their kids' upbringing and part of their kids' educational experience in the building. So, it is a unique place . . .

Mr. Clark recalled,

> The community is very supportive of the school system. They respect the job that we do. Generally, they have our backs when we call, and I feel that is the same for the other schools in the district. The school system has a reputation of doing right by kids. And by it being such a small rural community. People don't just move here to Mana County, so people have a love for the school system because it is the same they came through and that helps. That is something I always notice in rural areas that it is easy to convince a parent that that the school is taking care of the child. When they have come through the system and they had good experiences. A lot times, which can be good or bad their friends still work in the schools and they're still involved with the school. We are the biggest employer in Mana County. So, if you don't work for the school district or the school system odds are you know someone personally who does. And I think that is a good thing because parents in the community are more informed about what is going on in school. And they have a vested interest in the school because it is their community.

The parents from these rural communities may not necessary participate in school activities, but they support the school by making themselves available for the school staff and principals, especially to correct their child's behavior. Many rural families live in poverty; however, they are willing to provide whatever monetary resources they have available to them to support the school. Many rural schools depend on donations from local businesses and churches to supplement the students' educational needs.

In efforts to build the community support, these principals must prove to themselves that they have a vested interest in the school and the community and by building relationships with students, teachers, and parents. For rural parents and the community, test scores matter. Oftentimes, African-American principals can only gain the respect from the school community by having satisfactory school performance. Consequently, their competency is questioned and their ability as principals to lead schools, so they have to work even harder to produce great outcomes for their schools.

Research Question 2: How do African-American principals perceive their past experiences, including as students and educators, and how do these influence their current work with African-American male students?

Theme 5: Understanding the Struggle

Each principal had firsthand accounts of the struggles and challenges these young men face in the school system. During each of the interviews, the principals would respond to a question referencing African-American students as "we" or "us," only validating that the participants are empathetic to the quandaries that African-American males encounter on a day-to-day basis in America. Likely at some point in their own

educational career, these educated, African-American men endured hidden, subliminal, and blatant racism as either students, teachers, or principals. Intersectionality, one of the tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) was used to analyze the race and gender experiences of the African-American principals that influenced them as they faced trials and tribulations as educational leaders, regularly subjected to the same racism as their African-American male students.

Throughout the interviews, it was evident that the principals understood the plight of African-American males and were empathetic to their academic, behavioral, and emotional struggles. Mr. Hamm responded, ". . . I feel like I understand them [African-American males]. I'm not quick to judge." Mr. Blackmon remarked,

> . . . And so, we had these kind of conversations, so I'm very critical to them. And I think that's necessary because this world is not going to be fair to them. It is not going to treat them nice. It's going to be very critical of them. You're going to have to prove yourself and over prove yourself because that's the climate that we live in.

Mr. Cox shared his own experiences with racial discrimination as an African-American male in the Armed Forces. He stated,

> I'm a Black male. I was brought up different. I was brought up in this cruel world that we live in and you see it [racism] everywhere you go. Like I said in an earlier [interview] that I spent nine years in the [military], when you go overseas you're still treated [as] Black or White in different countries, so it's everywhere.

Thus, Mr. Cox made himself available and visible to talk with the all students, particular African-American male students, in his building. He quoted, "I don't push them away when they want to come talk, even if I'm in the middle of something." Mr.

Bowen noted that it is his hope that African-American males will understand their worth, their value, and realize that they can be a lot more than what they are achieving at the time. He opined, “We got to get them thinking positively about themselves.”

Experiencing racism as leaders. The South has a long history of racial tension stemming from slavery, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement, and “historical legacies of oppression and social exclusion continue to affect poor families in rural communities” (Mette et al., 2016, p. 71). Interestingly, when the principals were asked what were some of the challenges they faced as African-American principals in a rural school, most of participants exclaimed it was racism from parents and/or teachers. All of them talked about how race and gender impact how people perceive their leadership abilities and, in many instances, their decisions were questioned.

Mr. Blackmon noted,

> You know it depends on the school. I would say here the biggest challenge is not only am I African-American, but I am not from here. And this is the kind of community that sticks together. They are going to take care of their own—good or bad. They are going to take care of their own—being African-American and not being a part of this community is a struggle because they don’t think I can understand their plight or situation. They make a lot of assumptions because of that and I would say that is the primary challenge. The other challenge is being young and Black, so it is strike one; you’re Black and not from here. Strike two is you’re Black and young . . . the last year, I got here I had a teacher to tell me I am not going to listen to someone who is Black and you’re younger than I am.

Mr. Blackmon admitted there was some racial tension on his staff, particularly with a specific teacher. It was uncommon to have an African-American male principal leading a rural school in a predominantly White farming community. He stated, “The staff has a hard time accepting direction from a Black male.” He added,

> . . . It is really trying to get people here to understand just because I am African-American, and I am young, and I am young in years of experiences as well doesn't mean I don't have something to offer this school. I have something these kids need.

Mr. Bowen recalled an instance when he was called the "n" word and he had to escort the parent off campus. He stated, "I've dealt with some pretty deep-running issues with race. And they weren't welcoming of my leadership."

As the assistant principal, Juquan Hamm explained how he went on a home visit along with the White principal; the White parent made it clear that he was neither welcomed in the house nor the property, and he had to return to the car under duress while his colleague intervened with the disgruntled parent. The differential treatment toward both educators is just another testament of the deep-rooted racial tension in rural communities. Furthermore, the assistant principal would contact parents on the phone—his name identified him as an African-American; consequently, he received push-back on some of his decisions, especially on matters that involved disciplinary suspensions of White students. For example, he openly discussed his interactions with both Black and White parents at the rural middle school.

> The most, the toughest time I had was at [rural middle school] was when I first got there. The first year was the most challenging. I was beginning to question myself [laughter] because you go through one thing on one side of the tracks. It's you're the uppity Black guy. "Who do you think you are to other African-Americans. I won't say all of them, but the majority of them. . . . who are you to tell me? You ain't no better than me just 'cause you got a piece of paper that's a college degree" and it was kind of envy. It was kind of envy from my own people. You know, being an administrator, you have to discipline their children and they just don't like that. Sometime law enforcement gets in and they're real mad at you now, cause now, you've cost them money. The child now has a record, and they have to go to court.

> . . . on the other side of the track, it was more of a "how dare you?" It was a flashback to the 60s, and Jim Crow times. You police your own. You don't touch mine. You let the other one of the lighter shade deal with mine. "How dare you?" How dare you still exists today with the affluent in this school.

Questioning of their competence. As they navigated the principalship, these rural principals were challenged to prove they were competent for the job as principal. In some cases, they were questioned by parents, teachers, and community stakeholders on their ability to do the job effectively. Mr. Wright felt parents [at his school] were offended when you did not do something their way. He stated,

> . . . I know what's gonna work for my students and my kids. I want to do what's best for them. But I think that's the biggest challenge of feeling like you're second [guessed], and you're questioned. You make a decision and somebody else can make the same decision, and you basically [made] the same decision, only difference is one is Black, and one is White. People, sometimes, trying to question me. People try and tell you how to do their job, your job, when they probably, I don't think, they even did beyond high school, or even graduated.

Mr. Jones recited a time when he first arrived at Hope High School in Dixie County. He was the first African-American principal at that school in 40 years. He had recently received his doctoral degree and the teachers questioned his terminal degree. They assumed he received his degree from an online program, referencing he was not smart enough to obtain it from a reputable university.

In addition, Mr. Staton described how he was treated as an assistant principal.

> . . . when I first started as an assistant principal, it was very difficult in showing the parents or sometimes the teachers and the community that I knew what I was talking about. It's like the perception when they see us is like when I say us, Black males, is like oh he just doesn't know what he is talking about, but I had to show it to them.

"It's like the perception when they see us, when I say us, Black males, is like 'Oh, he just doesn't know what he is talking about.'" Now as principal, he lets his data speak for him. He stated, "You know I don't take it personal, I just let it roll off my back. But I stick to the data or whatever I have in front of me for that parent and I just move on from there." He added,

> As a Black principal, like I said before you really have to work a little harder. You have to work harder to stay on your A-game. . . . certainly, as a Black male, you really have to work harder. That's why I stay late and work hard. I go to whatever conference I can go to—professional development so I can stay knowledgeable of what's going on.

These principals felt that they must work harder and prove they are capable and competent to do their job.

Theme 6: "You Saw the Best in Me"

> He saw the best in me
> When everyone else around
> Could only see the worst in me
> Can I tell y'all one more time
> One more time?
> I said He saw the best in me
> When everyone else around
> Could only see the worst in me
> I wish I had a witness tonight
> All I need is one
> Hey
> He saw the best in me
> (When everyone else around me)
> When everyone else around
> (Could only see)
> Could only see the worst in me (Lyrics by Marvin Sapp, 2010)

When I composed this section, I thought about the gospel song, “He Saw the Best in Me When Everyone Else Around Me Saw the Worst in Me.” This is the narrative for African-American men in America. Over the past several decades, many African-American males have been stigmatized by negative images and stereotypes, especially by the media. For many African-American males, these negative views are internalized as the norm. Howard et al. (2012) purport, “The perpetuation of negative attitudes toward Black males is troubling because it often starts at an early age and becomes normalized in the national psyche” (p. 90). However, as these principals shared their personal stories, it became clear that someone saw the best in them, shaping their collective identities as African-American men and as leaders.

Similar to the importance of relationships for their students, the principals themselves shared how they were influenced by caring teachers and administrators who empowered them to be successful. Even years later, the influence of those educators who saw the best in them continues to have an impact on their lives. From those experiences, these principals know firsthand how relationships with a caring adult affects African-American males, and the importance of having someone in their lives to recognize and cultivate their gifts and talents. The research supports that there is a positive correlation between teachers’ expectations and student outcomes. Ladson-Billings (1994) points out that teachers with culturally relevant practices believe all students can succeed by disrupting notions of social outcasts, encouraging affirmations of culture, and by denigrating constant and repeated negative beliefs about African-Americans.

The interactions between teacher and student are critical to educational outcomes for African-American males (Warren, 2016). Mr. Clark discussed how, as a student, he liked school despite the challenges he faced at home. He responded,

> I always remember liking school. I always remember having that I had the support of my teachers. I don't ever recall having a bad experience as a student with a teacher. I remember the ones I enjoyed the most that meant the most to me felt like they cared about me outside of just being a student.

He also added,

> We need to know what is in it for us. How is this going to benefit me? This is why relationship is so important because I would do stuff for Mrs. Morris and Mr. Grey because I was not mature enough to understand I was doing it for myself. I needed that relationship because I done it to make them proud. . . . And that's why the relationship, it is no different in school. We have to establish those meaningful, caring relationship.

Jackson et al. (2014) suggested,

> Teachers who engage in culturally responsive caring foster relationships with students that encourage them to develop confidence, pride, a sense of responsibility, and critical consciousness. In practice, teachers who exhibit culturally responsive caring provide academically demanding learning experiences in a supportive and encouraging environment. (p. 400)

Mr. Blackmon shared a powerful story about his life as a military child. He stated, "I grew up military. My dad was in the Navy and we moved around quite a bit. I remember being the new kid all the time." However, one of his teachers impacted his life by tapping into his potential as a writer. When she discovered he was a good writer, she encouraged him to seek a career in journalism. He reminisced,

> . . . He [his father] retired, and we moved to [another state] and that was probably the longest stent of education for four or five years. My younger years, I remember moving all the time just consistently moving—just having to be toss to and fro and having try to play catch up each school year. But I always had good teachers, teachers who really saw the gift in me.

Furthermore, Mr. Staton stated it was an elementary school teacher who made him and the other African-American males in his class feel special and made them feel confident that they could accomplish anything. She would ask them their goals and plans. He and his classmates wanted to be athletes; she convinced them to focus on a career instead of becoming a professional athlete. Also, Mr. Hamm recalled he had never considered going to college until one teacher saw his potential as a college student and influenced him:

> I put athletics and academics together because if it wasn't for one or the other, the other wouldn't have been possible, okay. The other one wouldn't have been possible. In the academic realm, there was a chemistry teacher, Mrs. Curtis. I was a basketball player and I was in there, and you know I wouldn't say I wasn't the smartest thing in the world. I did my work. I paid attention in class and I did my work, 'cause again, the phone could not ring at my house. I made an A in chemistry and I was the first Black basketball player . . . not Black person, okay, but the first Black athlete to ever make an A in her class. That was the first person that mentioned college to me.
>
> Mrs. Curtis told me, "You have what it takes to make it in college, and not all of us do, son." And I said, "Okay, you know," and then, you know, I went down, and talked to a counselor right then, 'cause she said that and planted it in my head. And then you know, you start thinking. "Well I could play basketball in college too." That is where I started plotting the course work and doing this and that and watching my transcripts too. Still not thinking what I was going to do with a college degree, but it was the goal . . .

Mr. Jones recalled why he decided to go into school administration:

> It kind of just happened that people saw something in me. And thought that I would make a great administrator, so they kind of started encouraging me to explore some different things and then I ended up applying for the principal fellows after I taught for a couple of years. And got into the program and that's how I ended up becoming an administrator. You can have a bigger impact on a school, that just your individual classroom. Even though, a lot of times you really don't have as much power as you think as a principal, but you really can impact, and really can create that environment where certain expectations are in place for things to happen, and you do have power over that.

Mr. Staton was inspired to go into administration by a former superintendent. He quoted,

> My superintendent from years ago saw something in me and he was my, I guess inspiration. Because he always told me, "We really don't have a lot of Black males in education, in administration." And that was my push. I know some people, it sounds textbook but it's actually the truth. It was just the fact, it was just the push from him to get more involved. And I never really wanted to be at the central office level, but I wanted to be at that point where I could make some decisions to influence, the African-American or just students in general.

Parents as the first teacher. The literature refers to the parents as their child's first teacher (Marzano, 2003). When the participants were posed the question about what contributed to their success, most of the principals stated they were influenced by their parents and credited them for their success. Griffin's (2006) research indicated, "One external source of motivation reported by almost all participants was their parents" (p. 392). Interestingly, most of the participants responded it was their dad that had the greatest influence in their lives.

Unequivocally, each principal credited his mom and/or dad for his personal and professional success as a student and principal. Parents play a significant role in

influencing the student on the benefits of education and that education is the key to making a better life for him. The research suggests parent involvement is one of the factors that changes a student's perception toward school (Barnard, 2004; Fan & Chen, 2001). Many of these parents exemplify certain characteristics that made lasting impressions on their sons' academic future, which consist of providing affirmations that they can achieve anything by modeling a value system of hard work, providing affirmations on what they can be or do, and setting high expectations for their future.

For example, Mr. Blackmon talked about how his daddy was a hard worker and the sacrifices he made for his family to ensure they were taken care of. He shared a somber story about how his father felt the need to work all the time leaving his mother to raise the family. Mr. Blackmon added,

> My dad is a hardworking man—32 years in the military and in between the 32 years he retired once and went back in. And during the time, he retired he worked two and three jobs to provide for his family. My dad is not an emotional guy, but he is a hardworking guy and he showed me really the level of intensity it takes to be successful.

He worked tireless hours only to come home to eat and sleep, consequently having no interaction with his children and leaving Mr. Blackmon feeling abandoned. He recalled the moments when he was teased my neighborhood friends because his father rode a bike to work when his car was repossessed. In later years, Mr. Blackmon learned to respect the level of hard work and commitment his father had for his family and work. He felt it was those values that shaped him as a leader.

Mr. Staton was motivated by his dad and inspired by his work ethic. He shared how his father would walk to work to the same job he had for 45 years. He talked about the last thing his father said to him. He stated, "One of the last things that he said to me and my son. We were the last two to see him and he was like, 'Boy, just continue doing what you're doing.' That's what he told me." He credits his father, even now, for being his inspiration. He stated that his people would commend his father as a textbook dad.

Likewise, Mr. Wright talked passionately about his father who had passed away from terminal cancer when he was in elementary school. While his father was sick, he assisted his mother with his care and would sit at his bedside just to listen to his father brag about his ability. It was also the time his dad would share his expectations he had for his [Mr. Wright's] future. During this interview, Mr. Wright became emotional thinking of his father and the last days they spent together. He recalled my father would say, "Boy, you gonna be somebody." He remembered his father saying, "I want you to be the first one to graduate [high school] and go to college. I want you to remember, just don't give up." He believed his father imparted him with wisdom and spoke positive affirmations into his life while he was on his death bed.

Mr. Jones felt that his mom was supportive of his schooling because she was a teacher herself. He stated his father was not well educated as his mom, but he worked hard. He talked about how his dad was a disciplinarian and getting in trouble at school was not an option. Overall, education was important to his parents. In addition, Mr. Bowen passionately talked about how it was his parents' expectations for him and his siblings to attend college. He stated, ". . . they [my parents] felt like it was their jobs to

provide opportunities. And it was my job and my siblings, it was our jobs to take advantage of those opportunities. We just weren't given a choice." Mr. Bowen made it clear that he and siblings were not asked if they were going to attend college. It was a matter of where they were going to attend college.

Mr. Clark believed his grandfather was his motivation for his success because his dad was on drugs and put the family through some unspeakable and unimaginable things due to his lifestyle as an addict. However, it was his paternal grandfather who gave his family some solace and stability. He recalled,

> You know my grandfather was the best teacher I ever had. He passed away when I was ten years old. He was my father figure. So, everything my father was doing I really didn't get exposed to it until after my grandfather passed away because he shielded and protected us from a lot of it. I did not realize any of it at the time.
>
> . . . He was the one who taught me how to fish and taught me how to ball your fist up and stand up for yourself. He taught me the importance of your name and your word and when you tell people all the things that I believe manhood to be. I learned those before the age of ten and that was my inspiration to be successful. Like even to this day, certain things I do or involve myself in or certain accomplishments, I still wonder if like my grandfather will be proud.

Parents have a significant influence over their children's achievement in school. Griffin's (2006) research outlined, "Parents were often described as impacting their children's internal drive by instilling them with an early desire to be academically successful, always encouraging them to 'do their best' and explore what life had to offer them" (p. 392). Directly or indirectly, in this study these parents were a source of motivation and had a significant influence over their achievement in school. Mr. Hamm stated his mom and dad pushed him academically. He shared, "I had a very strong-

minded father. He was 29 years in the [military].” He believed the military made his dad a man. His father would give them [Mr. Hamm and his siblings] advice about the importance of making the right decisions. He quoted, “. . . [s]o, I can say he [my father] was both trained in street smarts and book smarts. He just always made us do the right thing.” From the lesson learned from his father, Jaquan made sure he did the right thing and that he stayed away from certain parts of town.

Interestingly, Hrabowski et al. (1998) outlined the following findings concerning the father’s role with parenting African-American males. They concluded:

> Beyond academics, fathers felt that their primary responsibility was preparing their sons to handle challenges faced by African-American males in society and that they, as males, could do this better than mothers. More specifically, the father’s message to their sons was to know how to handle the possibility of mistreatment. In preparing their sons for these challenges, several messages to the sons emerged: (1) recognize that the Black males are often placed in difficult situations, especially involving the need for avoiding violence and drugs, and that certain situations and locales should be avoided if at all possible; (2) learn the value of African-American history and culture and have pride in one’s heritage; (3) realize that life is not always fair and that it may be necessary to work even harder to achieve parity with others; (4) become highly educated in order to succeed and to help others in the race; (5) know how to handle fights (some fathers mentioned teaching their sons how to walk away from potentially violent situations, and others discussed the need for their sons to be able to defend themselves); and (6) learn to act responsibly, especially regarding sexual activity, and understand that respecting women is an important part of becoming a man. (pp. 191–192)

The literature suggests that African-American males have historically underachieved in many areas throughout their education career (Noguera, 2003). In fact, research by Joe and Davis (2009) showed that the academic disparities begin prior to kindergarten, suggesting that school readiness begins prior to school entry. Thus, parental

influence is critical to a child's education prior to school-age and making early intervention a fundamental strategy for the success of African-American males. Several of the principals agreed that African-American males need early intervention and it is one of the practices needed to ensure they have a level playing field and are school ready. Davis's (2003) research further suggested:

> Early schooling is a place in which Black boys begin to make sense about their various identities at school. In the process, counter-identities are created inside and outside school that feed on a traditional masculine hegemony of behaviors and attitudes. I am well aware that the development of Black boys' social identity is complicated by the heavy dosages they get from immediate and distance sources, such as family, community, church, and the media. Indeed, these social messages provide young males with information about their place and purpose. Schools, for sure, are contested sites in which Black boys learn to negotiate the endorsement and participation in a variety of gendered identities that could enhance or restrict their achievement possibilities. (pp. 532–533)

Theme 7: Leading by Example

Many of the principals find themselves having a certain level of commitment to the education of African-American male students and they desire to be positive role models to them in the school setting. The principals shared a level of responsibility for African-American male students—they are their brothers' keeper, so to speak. The principals believed that many times they are the only positive role models to whom these young men are exposed daily. Thus, they felt a level of obligation to lead by example and model certain standards (i.e., appropriate dress, using correct English, how to treat women) toward the African-American male students.

Mr. Hamm stated,

> I hope to be the example for them. They ask. Kids will ask because they are very intuitive. I just try to tell my staff [to be an example as well]. That is why I do not go anywhere because I do not want to be the one that is on the front page of the [news]paper that they will see. That would hurt a whole lot of kids because they see somebody that made it. I hope to be that example at least for a little while longer.

When Mr. Hamm was asked what recommendations, he would give to other school leaders, educators, or parents to help increase academic outcomes for African-American males, he noted that it is important to believe in them and to lead by example. Mr. Clark stated, "I lead by example and share my story and the things I've learned along the way with these students." Mr. Bowen stated,

> I think I have to uphold a certain standard and I think modeling is one thing that I do for them. I try to do that well. I'm always careful and I don't speak a whole lot of slang . . . I don't want them to think that is okay.
>
> . . . I try to present an image that I would want them to at some point emulate. I always try to look presentable. I think it is important to be well-groomed. I think it is important to look the part. . .. I don't ever recall any of my teachers wearing jeans when I was growing up.

Mr. Cox opined, "I try to be a positive role model. I try to teach them [African-American males] what's right or wrong."

Not only it is important to be role models to the students, Mr. Blackmon wanted to be a positive example to his staff. He led conversations with his staff about the importance of establishing high expectations for African-American students. He

proclaimed that it is not easy having conversations with staff to change their thinking about students:

> If you change a man's environment, you'd be amazed at what he can do. . . . We have had that conversation, even in scheduling, about really trying to push those kids [African-American males] into honors and AP courses to see how they'll fair in those [classes]. So, again having those conversations with faculty or staff isn't always an easy conversation because they really feel like, well if he hadn't ever been in an honors class, he shouldn't take an honors class.

Mr. Blackmon felt like it was important to lead change and set the example of high expectations for his teachers. He was willing to have those crucial conversations for change.

In order to lead change, some of these principals provided professional development to address deficit-thinking and racism at the school level. For example, Mr. Blackmon was concerned about the number of students in the Honors and AP classes, so he developed a plan to incorporate culturally responsive training next school year. He stated,

> We were talking about how we can do culturally responsive training throughout the year next school year. It is going to be a part of our professional development plan. If you really want to see this demographic grow and be successful, it starts do we really understand the culture? Are we responding to their [African-American males] need?

Kaden Jones added,

> You see little microaggressions or that sort of thing in a way people talk to certain kids and the things they may say to them that they don't realize. I don't think they are being intentionally mean or intentionally causing them to have a complex about themselves or make them feel like they're not welcome in the school but

> that kind of thing is still present. It just takes training to get people to realize you can just say these things. This morning we had a multicultural presentation from someone from the district office.

The principals in this study take pride in leading by example and being a positive role model for African-American male students. Mr. Hamm stated, "It helps when you can lead by example and you can look at your past and say, 'It's possible because I did it.'" This is the message they hope and desire to convey to African-American males that if I can do it, you can too.

Summary

In this chapter, I identified and discussed the findings from the data obtained from qualitative interviews of eight African-American male principals leading rural school. Each of the principals shared his personal experiences as a young African American male. Several overarching themes were established on how these experiences influenced their practice and support of African-American male students. The following practices and support include the importance of establishing and encouraging positive relationships; the importance of academic supports; the importance of cognizant (DeMatthews et al., 2017) and caring disciplinary practices; and the importance of community supports for African-American males in rural schools. Several themes emerged from the principals' personal and professional experiences that influence their own perspectives about the African-American male students.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CLOSING THOUGHTS

The purpose of this study is to examine the leadership practices of eight, African-American male principals and their work to support African-American male students in rural K-12 public schools. There is an alarming achievement gap between African-American males and their Caucasian counterparts in K-12 schools; however, most of the research related to this gap has been conducted in urban schools. Similar to urban school districts, rural schools are faced with many obstacles and institutionalized barriers (i.e. limited resources, and generational poverty) and the community values oftentimes impede growth within the local schools and school districts.

The African-American rural male principals selected for this study from elementary, middle, and high school levels, share their stories and counter-narratives on how they support African-American males in the educational setting. The principals relate the roles they played to ensure African-American male students receive equitable opportunities and resources in order to be successful in school. I began this study with the following research questions:

1. How do rural, African-American male principals support African-American male students at their schools?

2. How do African-American principals perceive their past experiences, including as students and educators, and how do these influence their current work with African-American male students?

In this chapter I will share conclusions based on the data collected and analyzed from face-to-face interviews, incorporating current literature in the field. The chapter will also include implications and my closing thoughts.

Research Question 1

How do rural, African-American male principals support African-American male students at their schools?

The days are over for principals to be only managers of schools, people, and processes. In today's schools, their job is multifaceted, fast paced, and everchanging. An essential function of working with African-American male students is to create and establish positive relationships. There is a positive correlation between when disadvantaged students feel connected to the teachers and improved academic success (Jensen, 2009). However, like Warren (2016), I believe

> research and practice related to school relationships . . . [must] look beyond the traditional student-teacher binary. Instead more work must explore the contribution of all stakeholders—families, communities, teachers, students, and school and district leaders—to minimize adverse educational outcomes of Black boys. (p. 22)

This study revealed that it is of the upmost importance for principals to create and establish those same relationships with students, particularly African-American males,

and to foster a schoolwide culture encouraging relationship building with the students, parents, and the community, especially in rural communities.

My data showed principals worked to establish positive relationships with their African-American males. They validated, from their own experiences that positive relationships create trust between educators and students. The participants made an effort to form relationships through personal connections, mentoring programs, and home visits. Gooden (2012) suggests, "These leaders [African-American principals] know they must have confidence in their students and consider developing more productive relationships with African-American children" (p. 82). One cannot reach or teach African-American males until relationships are established.

The findings also indicated that African-American male students need highly effective academic support in literacy (Tatum & Muhammad, 2012) and interventions to close learning and opportunity gaps. Early intervention is key to building an academic foundation as a preventive measure to eliminate gaps before they begin (John, 2016). Research by Cotton (2003) suggests, "A principal's strong focus on academics is a key determinant of school achievement outcomes" (p. 9). Interestingly, the principals in this study who focused on instructional practices, research-based interventions, schoolwide literacy for their schools, and created positive relationships had students whose overall performance "exceeded student growth" on the NC EVAAS data. Principals need to be strong instructional leaders to guide and lead teachers in ongoing professional development, curriculum, and instruction with a focus on improving student achievement and must have the ability to create a school culture that builds and fosters positive

relationships for African-American males. When this is the case, then, all students will excel.

Most importantly, the principals who felt comfortable talking about instructional practices and strategies (Jaquan, Kaden, John, and Thomas) led schools whose overall performance was much better on state accountability standards for student growth. In order to achieve an excellent rating for student growth, a school must meet the needs for individual subgroups, including students who are historically at risk.

An emerging theme from the study was the participants protected African-American males from exclusionary disciplinary practices in rural schools. The research states there is a higher likelihood of being suspended and removed from school for African-American males (Andrews, 2016; Gonsoulin et al., 2012). Furthermore, Osher et al. (2012) suggest, "Schools play a key role in accelerating or intervening on the school-to-prison pipeline (p. 284). These principals found alternative ways to address disciplinary issues for African-American male students, especially for infractions such as disrespect, disruptiveness, and insubordination. These principals conferenced with African-American male students about their behavior in an effort to uncover the root cause of their actions in hopes of preventing future incidents. They openly discussed how there is a huge discrepancy in how teachers code disciplinary infractions for African-American males, even when training and professional development are provided. They found dealing with disciplinary issues with African-American males is a difficult part of their job as principals.

Contrary to popular belief, each of the principals felt that the rural communities where their students resided were supportive of their efforts as principals. Rural communities are unique and often have close community ties. Burt and Boyd (2016) purport, "Connection to the community is a key component to rural living" (p. 92). Oftentimes those connections cause locals to be wary of outsiders. Several of the principals in the study were considered "outsiders" because they were not from the community. They worked to build relationships with parents and community and the parents, in turn, supported their sons. However, the principals had to prove they were advocates for the child and had his or her best interests at heart.

Research Question 2

How do African-American principals perceive their past experiences, including as students and educators, and how do these influence their current work with African-American male students?

Leadership development and practices begin with one's own personal and professional experiences. In the book, *On Becoming a Leader*, Bennis (2009) points out that leaders learn from their experiences. Bennis notes that learning from experiences means:

- Looking back at your childhood and adolescence and using what happened to you then to enable you to make things happen now, so that you become the matter of your own life rather than its servant.
- Consciously seeking the kinds of experiences in the present that will improve and enlarge you.
- Taking risks as a matter of course, with the knowledge that failure is as vital as it is inevitable.

- Seeing the future—yours and the world's—as an opportunity to do all those things you have not done and those things that need to be done, rather than as a trial or a test. (p. 93)

A recurring theme that evolved from this study is that African-American principals understand the struggle that African-American males endure in the United States because they continue to experience similar treatment. All of the principals admitted they endure racism as leaders by teachers and parents.

This study revealed that the principals' past K-16 schooling experiences influenced their current work as educational leaders. Each of the principals felt strongly that they were impacted by supportive and caring teachers who saw their potential and pushed them to excellence. Each of the principals had an opportunity to reflect on their past experiences as students, teachers, and leaders; it was those experiences that shaped them as leaders. The evidence from the study revealed that the participants were influenced by teachers or administrators.

The principals also credited their parents' guidance, encouragement, expectations, and influence that empowered them to be successful as leaders and men. As Griffin (2006) has observed, parents activate their children's external drive and socially influence their goals. Mr. Hamm talked about how his parents encouraged him; Mr. Wright spoke about how his dad spoke affirmations into his life, Mr. Bowen concluded his parents set high expectations for him, and Mr. Clark recalled the support he received from his single mom and grandparents. Consequently, the parental role is imperative to the success of these African-American male principals.

During Pre-*Brown vs. Board of Education*, African-American principals played a significant role in the lives of African-American students and families (Siddle Walker, 2000). They were influential and advocated for the equal rights and treatment for their students and community. Even today, African-American principals continue to play a pivotal role in making a difference, sometimes just with their presence in the lives of African-American males. Principals are agents of change (Riehl, 2000). These principals felt it was important to lead by example and to be a positive role model for the African-American males at their school and the communities at large. Gooden (2012) noted, "African-American principals know serving African-American kids is an important part of their mission, they know how to advocate, recognize, and address race-based inequities" (p. 82).

Several tenets from critical race theory were used to give voice to a group of individuals who are historically silenced and uncover the reality that racism still impacts educational practices and policies affecting African-American males in K-12 rural schools. In addition, the commonly portrayed social and cultural images of African-Americans affect the principals' influence in school settings while they are attempting to remove layers of oppressive and exclusionary educational practices for African-American male students. Negative constructions of African-American males are portrayed in the media and every aspect of our society—filtrating into schooling practices, belief systems, and level of expectation. However, there is a paradigm shift; schools are becoming more diverse requiring the contributions of diverse leaders.

Implications and Recommendations for Educators and Education

It is my personal philosophy that education is the great equalizer and provides citizens the opportunity for upward mobility and to change the narrative for future generations to come. Educators, teachers, and administrators play a major role in ensuring students are prepared for the 21st century. Based on my study, I offer the following recommendations for teachers, principals, and district leaders.

- Principals and district leaders must create a culture within schools where all educators are encouraging and build positive relationships with all students, particularly African-American males and minority students, by creating learning environments where these students are valued and appreciated.
- African-American males need academic supports with a focus on literacy. The principals in this study felt that literacy is the foundation for the academic growth for African-American males. The immersion of literacy throughout the learning environment provides an increase in social capital for students in rural settings.
- African-American males perform better when working in small groups, one-on-one instruction, and with culturally-relevant pedagogy. Teachers need to learn ways to adapt their instruction to meet the unique learning needs for African-American males.
- Early intervention is critical for African-American males in efforts to build foundational skills and to bridge learning gaps before they begin. Teachers must be knowledgeable and train on research-based interventions and

evidence-based practices that will impact the achievement for African-American males.

- Teachers and administrators need professional development on how to provide personalized learning opportunities for African-American males.
- Rural schools serving African-American males need to focus on parental involvement and an understanding of community norms and values to better serve the school and community.
- Rural schools serving African-American males should create mentoring programs at the school and assign students with a caring adult.
- Research-based practices are needed to eliminate historically exclusionary disciplinary practices and to deter the school-to-prison pipeline. The first order for any school and district is to take proactive steps to ensure there are positive student relationships with staff.
- It is critical that school leaders, administrators, and principals review and monitor disciplinary consequences contributing to the disproportionality and develop processes to ensure consistency in interpretation of behaviors and the consequences.
- School improvement teams must look more closely at the suspension and expulsion data and develop a plan of action for repeat offenders at the school level. Professional development is needed for teachers and support staff regarding policies and best practices using positive behavior support (PBIS) to deter and eliminate exclusionary discipline practices.

- At-risk students should be assigned to adult mentors in order to provide academic, emotional, and behavior support.
- It is imperative to create school-family partnerships. Educators would benefit from making home visits in hopes of building relationships with students, parents, and the community.

Implication and Recommendations for Universities and Preparation Programs

Institutions of higher education (IHEs) have a significant function in ensuring principals and educational leaders are qualified to be 21st century leaders in schools that are more diverse, now more than ever. The following recommendations are for universities and colleges, particularly for the work with African-American males.

- Universities should provide training for teachers, administrators, and educational leaders on culturally-relevant pedagogy and practices by incorporating movement and music into instruction.
- It would be beneficial for IHE to incorporate and provide a counseling component to the plan of study for administrators; it would afford principals the appropriate strategies to deal with behaviors more effectively.
- Continual training is needed to prepare administrators to be instructional leaders on current research-based interventions in reading and math.
- Institutions of higher learning should recruit and accept more African-American male leaders into leadership programs (e.g., Principal Fellows Program) in efforts to produce social justice leaders. In addition, it would be

beneficial to provide mentoring from highly effective school administrators for those future leaders.

- It is important to provide all K-12 teachers the training to properly teach the foundations of reading.
- All K-12 teachers and future administrators need exposure to successful African-Americans and IHEs should abandon negative instructional materials that focus on the deficit-model concerning people of color.

Implications and Recommendations for Education Policy

Until there are policies to support and encourage the importance of closing gaps for minority students, we will continue to obtain the same results. The following implications are recommended for education policy.

- To create disciplinary policies that address the inconsistency with current school, district, and state policies for certain infractions relating to disruption, insubordination, and disrespect.
- One size does not fit all students, so policymakers need to create policy that will personalize student learning, especially to meet the needs for the digital age.
- Many rural communities are poor with a limited tax base, thus more funding for rural schools is needed to sustain educational initiatives, personnel, and infrastructure.

- Consideration should be given to funding early intervention programs for students in poverty in rural areas. All elementary schools in rurality should have preschool programs with a focus on literacy.
- Policies should be created that provide early intervention/preschool opportunities and provide transportation for families living in rural areas.
- Pre-K programs have a direct impact on school readiness (Burt & Boyd, 2016). State policymakers must allocate substantial funding to support and sustain Pre-K programs in rural areas.

Future Implications for Education Research

Rural communities are unique and often want to maintain the status quo. Many rural communities suffer from "brain drain," where the most talented citizens leave the area after graduating from college. Several of the African-American principals dealt with resistance from teachers, parents, and community members because they were not from the community. Does this behavior prevent talented others from coming into the community? Future research should examine the impact of rural politics and on student achievement, schooling practices, and fiscal resources.

Another area for future education research is to look closely at the middle schools in rural areas lead by African-American male principals. As I was working on selecting principals with at least a "C" school rating, it was difficult to located schools with such ratings. Most of the middle schools had a "D" or "F" rating, which is of great concern to me. These schools are not making the grade on North Carolina accountability standards.

Consequently, I could only locate several schools with at least a "C" rating. This should be alarming and should provoke more questions than answers.

Closing Thoughts

As I reflect on my dissertation journey, there were life lessons along the way. I spent many hours reading research, coding interviews, analyzing data, and writing to produce a work that would give voice to a marginalized group of principals and students. I traveled to some interesting rural places throughout North Carolina and met a special group of men. I am grateful to them for spending their time with me to share their stories on what it is like to navigate the principalship in rurality and to meet the needs of a group of boys and young men who are historically considered at risk in areas where institutionalized barriers and obstacles continue to exist. I was so impressed with the work the principals did to empower African-American males. The saying, "Our Brothers' Keeper," was evident in their work to support African-American boys.

As American citizens, we live in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, have some of the best schools, colleges, and universities, and are privy to the most innovative technological resources and devices, but we continue to exhibit a sector of United States citizens who are lagging behind. It is disheartening. As a nation, we must examine the systemic systems of oppression, racism, and discrimination to truly address the contributing factors for the pervasive achievement and opportunity gaps for African-American men. A closer look is needed to address instructional practices, school funding, disciplinary procedures, and educational opportunities within rural schools and districts for students of color, particularly African-American males.

There is one quote from Mr. Hamm's interviews that resonate with me and brought a certain level of awareness on the discourse and challenges most African-American principals face when trying to promote and implement social justice and equity for African-American students. He stated,

> I think that we're waiting for society to, quote unquote, allow us to attempt to start fixing it [achievement gap]. Just like me walking the line of being ridiculed for stepping too far. Then, I really think it is—we are waiting instead of taking a chance.

Many times, these principals have limited powers to bring change within their buildings without fear of being perceived as showing favoritism, promoting their own race, or playing the race card for addressing racism, oppression, and exclusionary practices affecting minority students, especially African-American males. These principals find themselves walking a tight rope hoping to save and empower African-American students while trying to maintain their own job security. In spite of the resistance, African-American principals have a commitment to the educational needs of African-American males.

However, the group of principals who were part of this study go to work each day to ensure their students are getting a quality education. They devote much of their time to their students, teachers, and the school community. During each interview, it was surprising to hear the commonalities among the participants as I began to witness themes unfold. The participants were all African-American males, but they were from diverse backgrounds within their own cultural group, and it is those experiences that contributed richness to the study. Their backgrounds varied from growing up in a single-parent

household to having both parents in the home. They were from small to large families, regardless of their backgrounds, they shared some common experiences as African Americans, as principals, and as men.

My son was the driving force and my passion for this study. As the principals shared their stories, I found myself relating them to my son's schooling experiences in rural schools. It made me realize even more the power and influence educators have on African-American males. As an educator for 21 years, I will be more conscious about my role in assisting with closing the achievement and opportunity gaps for African-American males.

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APPENDIX A

ORAL RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Oral Recruitment Script

Hello,

My name is Neshawn Dawson. I am currently a doctoral student at University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I would like for you to participate in a research study examining the leadership practices and work of African American male principals as they support African-American male students in rural schools. Extensive literature exists on the successes and failures of African-American males in research, but this research has been primarily conducted in urban settings. Rural schools and principals face the same challenges and obstacles of deficit-thinking, inadequate resources, and poor performance. The researcher will outline the strategies and practices these rural, Black principals deploy to narrow the achievement gap.

I am seeking eight, African-American male principals who lead rural schools to share the personal and professional experiences as an educational leader in hopes to improve instructional strategies for African-American male students. You will share your perceptions during two 90 minute interviews held at a time and place at your request. I would like to observe/shadow you at your schools during a period on dates and times suitable for you. I plan to collect end-of-grade or end-of-course subgroup data to determine the academic performance of the Black male students and this information will be de-identified by deleting or masking any identifiers. You will be assigned a fictitious name to protect your identity. Lastly, there is no financial reward as a result of you participating in this study. If you are willing to participate in this study, I can be reached at 252-675-7877.

Thank you,

Neshawn Dawson

APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT LETTER

Date_____

Dear_____

I am currently a doctoral student at University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I am writing to request permission to conduct a dissertation research project. The study will examine the leadership practices and work of African American male principals as they support Black male students in rural K-12 schools. Extensive literature exists on the successes and failures of African-American males in research, but this research has been primarily conducted in urban settings. Rural schools and principals face similar challenges and obstacles of deficit thinking, inadequate resources, and poor performance in educating Black male students, but may also face other conditions related to the rural context.

From the perspectives of Black, rural administrator, the researcher will explore their perceptions about leadership in rural schools and the state of education for the Black males, as well as identify strategies that are working to increase their academic achievement and success in rural schools. From interviews and observations, this study will delve into the leadership practices and work done to provide greater equity and social justice for African-American boys in rural school districts in North Carolina. Along with the interviews and observations, I will examine the students' end-of-grade or end-of-course subgroup data to determine the academic performance of Black male students. For high school principals, I will look at the schools' drop-out rates to determine if their work and support contribute to high school graduation for their Black male students.

I am seeking up to eight, African-American male principals who lead rural schools to share their personal and professional experiences as an educational leader in hopes to *improve instructional strategies* for African-American male students. If approval is granted, the principals will share their perceptions during two 90-minute interviews held at a mutually agreed upon time and place. In addition, my research will include a one-hour observation of each principal at his school during dates and times suitable for him. The data collected will be confidential. The principal, school, and district will be assigned a fictitious name to protect their identity. Lastly, there is no financial reward for the participation in this study. If you approve this study, please submit a signed letter of permission on your district's letterhead acknowledging your consent and permission for me to conduct research within the district. If you have any questions, please contact me.

Sincerely,

NeShawn Dawson

APPENDIX C

CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT

Project Title: Our Brothers' Keeper: The Leadership Practices of African-American Male Principals and Their Work with African-American Male Students in Rural Schools

Principal Investigator and Faculty Advisor: NeShawn Dawson and Ulrich Reitzug

Participant's Name: _____

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in the study is voluntary. You may choose not to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. There may not be any direct benefit to you for being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies. If you choose not to be in the study or leave the study before it is done, it will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Details about this study are discussed in this consent form. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. If you have any questions about this study at any time, you should ask the researchers named in this consent form. Their contact information is below.

What is the study about?
This is a research project. Your participation is voluntary. This study will examine the work and leadership practices of African-American male principals and how they support African-American males in K-12 rural schools. I will ask you as a Black, rural administrator, about your perceptions regarding leadership in rural school and the state of education for the Black males. I will ask you to identify the strategies that are working to increase the academic achievement and success of Black male students in rural schools. From interviews and observations, this study will delve into the leadership practices and work done to provide greater equity, and social justice for African-American boys in rural school districts in North Carolina.

Why are you asking me?
I am seeking up to eight African-American male principals leading rural schools in North Carolina.

What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?
I would like to you to participate in two-90 minute interviews at the location best suitable for you to discuss your work and leadership practices when working at African-American male students. I will audiotape the interviews, so I can record your exact words. Along with the interviews and observations, I will examine the students' end-of-grade or end-of-course subgroup data to

determine the academic performance of the Black male students in your school. For principals leading high schools, I will look at the school's drop-out rates to determine if your work and support contribute to high school graduation for your Black male students.

Is there any audio/video recording?
The interviews will be audiotaped, and will be transcribed verbatim. As follow-up, you will be given the opportunity to read and review the transcription for accuracy. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the recording, your confidentiality for things you say on the recording cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the recording as described below. The recordings and transcriptions will be locked in a secure file cabinet. At the end of the study, the tapes will be destroyed.

What are the risks to me?
The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants. There should be no risk to this study. If you have any questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact NeShawn Dawson at 252-675-7877 or nmdawson@uncg.edu and Ulrich Reitzug who may be reached at rick_reitzug@uncg.edu.

If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study, please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at (855)-251-2351.

Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?
There are no direct benefits to the participants in the study. This study may contribute to the body of literature on educational practices and leadership styles of African-American male principals leading rural schools and their work with narrowing the achievement gap for African-American male students.

Are there any benefits to *me* for taking part in this research study?
There are no direct benefits for me to participants in this study.

Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?
There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

How will you keep my information confidential?
The data will be collected and stored in a locked file cabinet. All transcriptions will be stored electronically and password protected. I will not identifying participants by name when data are disseminated, confidential data collection procedures will be in place to protect your identity. The data will be kept three years and destroyed thereafter. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

You will receive the transcriptions via email to review for accuracy. Absolute confidentiality of data provided through the Internet cannot be guaranteed due to the limited protections of Internet access. Please be sure to close your browser when finished so no one will be able to see what you have been doing.

What if I want to leave the study?
You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state. The investigators also have the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because you have had an unexpected reaction, or have failed to follow instructions, or because the entire study has been stopped.

What about new information/changes in the study?
If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:
By signing this consent form, you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate, in this study described to you by NeShawn Dawson.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Approved IRB
1/30/17

APPENDIX D

IRB APPROVAL

THE UNIVERSITY of NORTH CAROLINA
GREENSBORO

OFFICE OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY
2718 Beverly Cooper Moore and Irene Mitchell Moore
Humanities and Research Administration Bldg.
PO Box 26170
Greensboro, NC 27402-6170
336.256.0253
Web site: www.uncg.edu/orc
Federalwide Assurance (FWA) #216

To: Neshawn Dawson
Ed Ldrship and Cultural Found
neshawnt@aol.com

From: UNCG IRB

Authorized signature on behalf of IRB

Approval Date: 1/30/2017
Expiration Date of Approval: 1/29/2018

RE: Notice of IRB Approval by Expedited Review (under 45 CFR 46.110)
Submission Type: Initial
Expedited Category: 5.Existing or non-research data,6.Voice/image research recordings,7.Surveys/interviews/focus groups
Study #: 15-0530
Study Title: Our Brothers' Keepers: The Leadership Practices of African-American Male Principals and Their Work with African-American Males Students in Rural Schools

This submission has been approved by the IRB for the period indicated. It has been determined that the risk involved in this research is no more than minimal.

Study Description:

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the work and leadership practices of eight, African-American male principals as they support African-American male students in rural schools. The participants currently serve as school principals at the elementary, middle, or high school level in K-12 public schools with various levels of administrative experience. They will be selected based on three criteria: 1) African-American male principals leading rural schools 2.) past or currently employed as an administrator for at least 3 years. 3) maintained a satisfactory ratings on state accountability standards. The first interview will capture personal and professional life experiences that contributed or shaped his leadership practices as principal. The second interview will focus on the supports provided to African-American male students.

Regulatory and other findings:

- If your study is contingent upon approval from another site (school districts), you will need to submit a modification at the time you receive that approval.

Investigator's Responsibilities

- **PLEASE NOTE:** According to the updated federal regulations 46 CFR 46, any protocol approved as expedited will no longer require continuing review as of January 2018. You are still required to obtain IRB approval for any changes to any aspect of this study before they can be implemented (use the modification application available at http://integrity.uncg.edu/institutional-review-board/). Should any adverse event or unanticipated problem involving risks to subjects or others occur it must be reported immediately to the IRB using the "Unanticipated Problem-Adverse Event Form" at the same website.

Signed letters, along with stamped copies of consent forms and other recruitment materials will be scanned to you in a separate email. **Stamped consent forms must be used unless the IRB has given you approval to waive this requirement.** Please notify the ORI office immediately if you have an issue with the stamped consents forms.

Please be aware that valid human subjects training and signed statements of confidentiality for all members of research team need to be kept on file with the lead investigator. Please note that you will also need to remain in compliance with the university "Access To and Retention of Research Data" Policy which can be found at http://policy.uncg.edu/university-policies/research_data/.

CC:
Ulrich Reitzug, Ed Ldrship and Cultural Found

APPENDIX E

PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview #1 (Focus on Rural School and Formative Year Experiences)

1. What is your name?
2. How many years have you been a principal?
3. Tell me how you would describe yourself.
4. What was your purpose or inspiration for going into school administration?
5. Tell me about the school, its culture, and the community.
6. What is the racial make-up of the students and the social-economic status of the students?
7. From your perception, what are the benefits of working in rural schools?
8. From your perception, what are some of the challenges of working in rural schools?
9. From your perception, what is the most challenging aspects of your job as a Black principal in a rural school?
10. Tell me about your schooling experiences
11. As a Black male, who or what influenced you to be successful?
12. What K-12 schooling experiences influenced your current work as a principal?
13. What experiences as a teacher or administrator influenced your current work as a rural principal?
14. Have you experienced any form of racism as the leader? If so, please elaborate.
15. What are your goals or vision for Black males at your school?

Interview #2 (Focus on Supports and relationships with African-American Males)

16. From your personal and professional experiences, what factors do you believe will promote academic success for African-American males?

17. From your perception, what factors do you believe discourage African-American males from the learning process?

18. What is your vision for social justice and equity for African-American males in your school?

19. What instructional strategies are in place in your school to promote African-American male student engagement in the learning process?

20. Describe your relationships and/or interactions with students within your school, particularly, African-American males?

21. As a principal, what do you do to support the African-American males at your school?

22. What other strategies or practices do you deploy to help African-American males who are struggling?

23. What do you do differently as a principal than perhaps other principals within your district to reach your African-American male population and help narrow the achievement gap?

24. From your perspective, do you treat African-American male students differently than your colleagues treat them? If so, how? If so, why do you think you treat them differently?

25. How do you solicit buy-in from all stakeholders (i.e. students, parents, teachers) to ensure African-American males are prepared for the next grade level or high school graduation?

26. How do you create or promote family-school partnerships? How important are these partnerships, particularly for African-American male students?

27. How else do you address equitable schooling (i.e. AP opportunities, discipline practices) for the Black male students at your school?

28. Based on your experiences, what recommendations would you make to school leaders, educators, or parents to help increase the academic outcomes of African-American students?

29. Do you have anything else you would like to share with me?

30. What questions do you have for me?

Probing Questions for the Former Rural Principal

31. From what you have told me, what did you do differently to reach African-American male students in the rural setting?

32. From what you have told me, how would you compare African-American male students in rural setting to the African-American male students you are serving now?

APPENDIX F

RESEARCH QUESTION/INTERVIEW QUESTION CROSSWALK

Research Question 1: How do rural, African-American male principals support African-American male students at their schools?

- Tell me about the school, its culture, and the community.
- What is the racial make-up of the students and the social-economic status of the students?
- From your perception, what are the benefits of working in rural schools?
- From your perception, what are some of the challenges of working in rural schools?
- From your perception, what is the most challenging aspects of your job as a Black principal in a rural school?
- From your personal and professional experiences, what factors do you believe will promote academic success from African-American males?
- From your perception, what factors do you believe discourage African-American males from the learning process?
- What is your vision for social justice and equity for African-American males in your school?
- What instructional strategies are in place to ensure African-American male students are engaged in the learning process?
- Describe your relationships and/or interactions with students within your school, particularly African-American males?
- As a principal, what do you do to support the African-American males at your school?
- What are the other strategies or practices do you deploy to help African-American males who are struggling to learn grade level work?
- What do you do differently than any other principal in your district to reach your Black male population and help narrow the achievement gap?

- How do you solicit buy-in from all stakeholders (i.e. students, parents, teachers) to ensure Black boys are prepared for the next grade level or high school graduation?

- How do you create or promote family-school partnerships? Do you believe these partnerships are important, particularly for Black male students?

- How else do you address equitable schooling (i.e. AP opportunities, discipline practices) for the Black male students at your school?

- Based on your experiences, what recommendations would you make to school leaders, educators, or parents to help increase the academic outcomes for African-American students?

Research Question 2: How do African-American principals perceive their past experiences, including as students and educators, and how do these influence their current work with African-American male students?

- Tell me about your schooling experiences

- As a Black male, who or what influenced you to be successful?

- What K-12 schooling experiences influenced your current work as a principal?

- What experiences as a teacher or administrator influenced your current work as a rural principal?

- Have you experienced any form of racism as the leader? If so, please elaborate.

General Questions:

- What is your name? How would you describe yourself?

- How many years have you been a principal?

- What was your purpose or inspiration for going into school administration?

- Do you have anything else to share with me?